

independently blue by judypoovey

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Summary:

Murray Bauman had every intention of leaving Indiana alone after exposing the lab, but the residents of Hawkins just won't let him. So maybe he's sticking around for a little while longer.

1. Chapter 1

Murray Bauman had no intention of bothering with Indiana anymore after exposing the lab. Really, he didn't. Sure, he had been crashing at a pay by the night hotel near Hawkins to monitor the situation most nights, not really returning to his shithole house. He had always sworn to him once he got it right, he'd leave that place behind. But... Even now that his reputation had been spared by the vindication that Nancy Wheeler had offered him, he didn't feel like going back to how things were. The world was too different, now. There were new things to know.

So maybe he was dragging his feet. In his defense, he was sure something else was liable to happen if he stayed long enough, and Nancy kept bringing him casseroles and wanting to talk to him, even though he'd told her to not bother trying to contact him again. She wasn't big on the whole listening to people thing.

He'd hate to disappoint her by disappearing suddenly, even though he had tried to tell her to get lost.

Wait, really?

Maybe he missed having a kid around. His own was back in Chicago with his mother, not interested in talking to his dad at the moment. He didn't blame either of them for that, things had been rough for a while, the whole Hawkins Conspiracy Obsession was just the breaking point.

His phone rang one morning, which was unusual. Not many people had the number and fewer people had any desire to speak with him. Plus, he was rarely home. Nancy would be in school, and she was his only regular correspondence.

"Yeah?"

"Bauman?"

"Chief Hopper, is that you?" he asked, trying to restrain his grin. "What can I do you for?"

He could nearly hear the irritable chief rolling his eyes. "Can you meet me at the station today? We need to talk."

"Am I in trouble?" A pause. "Are *you* in trouble?"

"You know what, I changed my mind, you can't help me after all."

"No, no, no, I'll be there, don't be ridiculous," he said. "I'll come as soon as I can."

"As soon as he could" was after just enough dawdling to make it seem like he had other things in his life going on other than drinking screwdrivers and watching soap operas. Jim Hopper was leaning against the hood of his truck, cigarette in hand. He offered it to Murray with the look of a man who desperately didn't want to be doing this at all.

"Get in the truck," the Chief said brusquely, which was by Murray's memory the only way he ever said anything.

He lit the cigarette. "Am I under arrest? Are you going to cuff me? I gotta warn you, I kinda like that stuff."

Chief Hopper rolled his eyes and opened the passenger door. "Get in or don't, it doesn't matter."

Murray got in the truck. He found it mostly clean, though reeking of cigarettes, a bag full of groceries in the back seat. This was all together a weird situation; his relationship to Jim Hopper had been mostly one of mutual irritation. It was not exactly the foundation for some clandestine trip.

"Against my better judgment, I'm trusting Nancy's opinion of you," Hopper said as he drove. "She says you're smarter than you let on. That you can be *trusted*."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me," he said, and sadly, in recent memory, that was functionally true. "I'll have to get her a card. Where are you taking us?"

"To my house," he said, scoffing.

"When I was twelve, my rabbi told me if you roll your eyes too much they'll pop out of your head," he joked, trying to ease the tension. That did warrant the slightest of smirks from Hopper.

"I'm guessing that didn't stop you."

"Nope."

Jim Hopper's house turned out to be a hunting cabin in the woods, a suspicious distance from any civilization. This was a detail that was nagging at Murray, because he'd read up on Hopper when he'd come to Hawkins and...

"I didn't realize you'd moved."

"Hm?"

"Your last known address is a trailer park just outside town, not a horror movie murder cabin," he said, flicking his cigarette butt into the leaves as he exited the truck.

"Keeping tabs on me?"

"Just had to do my due diligence when I got here, that's all." Sure, he'd kept tabs on everyone potentially involved in the Holland case. But hey, that was his job.

"I moved. Needed more space. The property's mine, from my Granddad. Mail goes to a PO Box now. Keeping a low profile."

Why would *allegedly incompetent* police chief Jim Hopper need to keep a low profile in bumfuck Indiana? More questions were being raised than being answered here. He knew that Hopper allowed his reputation to take a dive on the Barbara Holland case because of the government's involvement, but beyond that...

"So what is this about, precisely?"

"Mind the trip wire," he said, ignoring the question.

Murray looked down just in time to catch himself, stepping over and hurrying to catch back up with the chief, who was knocking on the

door.

“Is that Morse Code?”

The door swung open and there was a teenage girl on the couch.

Interesting.

Jim Hopper did *not* have a teenage daughter. He had one daughter, Sara, deceased. Nancy had apparently left some details out of her story, and he'd be mad if he weren't impressed with her shrewdness.

“No signal.” She pointed to a radio by the door.

“Sorry, kid.”

The girl turned her dark eyes to Murray. She bore no resemblance to Hopper, but genetics were a fickle thing, so that could mean any number of things. “What's your name?” he asked her.

She looked at Hopper instead of speaking.

“Legally, her name is Jane Eleanor Hopper,” he said. “But she was born Jane Ives. And spent most of her life as 011. Goes by El now.”

Murray's brain usually worked a little quicker than the average person's, but it was in overdrive right now. “The little Russian sleeper agent, I take it?”

“Ted Wheeler's an idiot for believing that story,” he said. “She's not Russian, she's from Indiana.”

“And she's your...?”

“As far as anyone else knows, my daughter. A one-night stand. Didn't find out until her mother's family couldn't take care of her anymore and sent her to me.” This was a well-practiced story, but Jim Hopper was not a proficient liar. “She's keeping a low profile for now, too, though, so that's between us.” Hopper was leaning against a little two-person table and Murray took a seat on the couch.

“Joyce made us casserole,” El said to Hopper, padding off into the

kitchen.

"I'm not hungry kid, but have as much as you want," he said, ruffling her hair as she walked by.

"Joyce Byers?"

"Irrelevant."

"So what is relevant? Just trying to tell me I was right the whole time?"

"Well, swap Russia for America and aliens for interdimensional monsters..."

"Thing is, I already knew this. Nancy told me everything, remember? She left out that little detail, though," he pointed to Eleven.

"She didn't know about Eleven until after she met with you. Told her to keep it to herself for a while. The details only just got ironed out. But that's why you're here. I want to fill in some gaps. And I need..." He swallowed, looking desperately uncomfortable about what he was about to say. "I want you to help me with something."

"You're making me complicit in this conspiracy. I can't say I appreciate it."

"You're already neck deep in the conspiracy. And you're safer than any of the rest of us, Bauman. That's the only reason I'm asking you instead of one of my contacts in New York or *any* other journalist in the developed world. We can't bring anyone else outside of this into it. The circle is big enough."

"So you realized 'journalist who exposed government corruption in small-town Indiana turns up dead' isn't a good headline?" he asked, cottoning on to the plan immediately. "You're smarter than you let on, Jim."

Hopper scoffed. "Look. A lot of things happened between when you spoke with Nancy last month and now. We can either talk about them and you file them away in that big old brain of yours, or you can walk your way back to town."

“Don’t tempt me with a good time, Chief. Let’s talk.” He pulled the notebook he kept in his jacket pocket out and flipped it open.

Much like Nancy filling in his timeline and the rest of the details surrounding Barbara and Will’s disappearances, Jim Hopper (with Eleven silently eating a squash casserole in the background) filled in a few more. A dozen juvenile monsters, a portal, a second experimented upon child, the horrifying fate of Terry Ives. Everything Hopper knew from the past year.

“How are you envisioning this? A full exposé? When are we running this?” He wasn’t fully willing to squander what good will he had cultivated with the Hawkins Lab Story by running the actual truth, but Hopper seemed confident in himself. “Should we spin it, like the other one?”

“We’re not. Yet. Write it up. Keep it under your pillow until the time is right.”

“Why tell me all of this if you don’t want to tell anyone yet?”

“I want it primed and ready to go when the time comes. And I’m not much of a writer, or much of a spinner, as you’d say.”

He grinned. “You don’t say?”

“Shut up.” Hopper disappeared and came back with two beers. “Want one?”

“More of a liquor guy, but sure,” he said, taking the offering.

Hopper sat down, cracking open the can and leaning back. “So that’s the story.”

Something else was going on, he could tell in the way Hopper was grimacing. Telling him about the monsters and the RadioShack manager getting devoured and how the government had been keen to sacrifice Will Byers once again was all well and good, but there was no reason for Jim Hopper to pass this message along. The story was tied up too neat. “It seems like you’ve got yourself all set, though. What other detail is there?”

“Hey, kid?” he called. “Wanna go call Mike for a bit? He should be home from school by now.”

She nodded obediently, putting her plate in the sink and disappearing into the back of the cabin, the door shut behind her.

“Okay. There’s this...doctor. He worked at the Hawkins Lab last year during the...what happened, right? Martin Brenner. Know him?”

Ah, the loose end appears. “The name came up.”

Hopper looked grim. Grimmer than usual. Murray leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “The girl in Chicago I told you about,” he said. “Eleven’s sister.”

Murray nodded.

“She says he’s alive. A guy that worked at the lab, who hurt Terry Ives. He says he’s alive too,” he said. “And I want to find him. If he’s still out there, Eleven isn’t safe. Which means Will isn’t safe, and that just means none of *us* are safe.”

Us as in all of them who knew about the Upside Down.

Find a disgraced mad scientist at the behest of a belligerent, unfriendly police chief. A job was a job.

“Do you remember this guy’s name, the one Eleven talked to?”

“I have it written down somewhere.”

“And the sister, Chicago, right?”

Hopper nodded.

“You know, before I left Chicago, there were stories about several police officers having incredibly vivid, severe hallucinations while chasing a group of criminals around the city. People were wondering if we were over-working our police officers, or if there was some crazy new drug out there, or something. Can I take it to mean that this...sister...might have been responsible?”

“Perhaps. I assume you blamed it on aliens at the time?”

“Russians poisoning our water supply, actually,” he said. “But honestly, I like this new angle. The threat was America this whole time. How...accurate. Poetic.”

“So you’ll help.” It wasn’t a question.

He shrugged. “Of course. I don’t have much else going on.”

“I’m not going to pay you.”

“I shouldn’t be as surprised as I am. It’s fine, I’ve got savings. And government hush money. It’ll be fun to use it to do the opposite of hush, I’ve got to say.”

He checked his watch. “We’ve got dinner at the Byers’ in an hour, I can drop you off on the way.”

Another meal with Joyce. He filed that away for later use. “Sounds fair.”

With some hesitation, Jim Hopper stuck his hand out to shake. “I... *ugh*...I appreciate it.”

Murray shook his hand. “The feeling’s mutual, Chief. Don’t get warm and fuzzy on me.”

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry you guys have to endure this weirdly self-indulgent nonsense fic but thank you for it.

Also the title is from a Nina Simone song, it'll come up at some point.

It took Nancy a day to show up at his house, lips tight in determined irritation as she knocked.

“*What?*” he asked, not without some affection, as he unlocked the door and she burst inside.

“What are you and Hopper up to?” she demanded, throwing her bag down on the chair and staring at him accusatorily.

“Word travels *so* fast in small towns.” He missed the city where no one cared about you and everything was anonymous.

“Will heard Hopper talking to Joyce about it and called Mike and Mike asked me if I knew anything,” she said, proving his point completely, but in a tone that suggested she didn’t agree. “I thought you were *leaving*.”

“I suppose I’m not,” he said. “Sit. You want pizza? Jonathan parking the car?”

She paused long enough to sigh. “...Steve. Jonathan and Hop are fixing some stuff around Joyce’s house tonight.”

“Still stringing poor Steve along?” he asked, though that hardly seemed in Nancy’s character.

“We’re *friends*.”

Murray didn’t find a lot of emotional investment in the entanglement

of teenage romance, but he did delight in stirring the pot a little. He was a pot-stirrer. It was his greatest weakness. “Poor, besotted Steve.”

“He’s not *besotted*. He understands. And...I mean, it’s hard to know what we know and see what we’ve seen and hang out with anyone who doesn’t understand. It feels weird and wrong, I mean.” Defensiveness gave way to a disarming vulnerability that Murray knew to be fully calculated, a tactic to get him to back off the poor schmuck waiting for her in the car.

“You could have called about this.”

“I don’t trust the phones in my house. The government was in there, remember?” She shuddered at the memory. That was a healthy sheen of paranoia, though he probably should be concerned about the level of trauma she’d endured instead of encouraging it.

“Smart. Hopper just wants my help with a few details,” he said. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not *worried*, I want in on it. *I* brought you into this.”

“I was already *in this*.”

“*I’m* the only reason you’re not still blabbering on about aliens and Russians, Murray!” she snapped, and okay she did have a point there. She’d helped him redirect into a more fruitful way of thinking, he supposed he might owe her one.

“Feisty today. *Okay*. There’s this guy who was involved last year that Hopper wants to find. A doctor. That’s all I know, now. He’s doing it for the girl.”

“For El?”

“Yes.”

“Then I *have* to help you. El is my friend. If she’s not safe, it’s my business too.” Her determination was steadfast.

“I’m not sure what you can do right now, but I won’t lock you out of the loop,” he said. “Hopper would probably prefer it that way, but I

don't believe in keeping secrets from my friends," he lied with a grin. "Are you sure you don't want me to order a pizza?"

"I already ate." She hesitated. "You really will tell me if you need help, right? If El's in danger? Or my brother?"

"Scout's honor."

"You were *not* a boy scout." She rolled her eyes.

"You've got to work on reading people, of course I was a boy scout. Just a really, really bad one." He chuckled and got up to fix himself a drink. "You don't have to keep coming around, you know. Not that I don't enjoy your company, but you don't need to feel obligated. I'm not lonely."

"I don't believe that. Plus...I mean..." She frowned. "I can't talk to my parents about this stuff. And Joyce and Hopper are both so busy and, you know."

"So you need an adult to talk to?"

"Kinda, I guess. My dad didn't even seem to *care* that Barb died. He said, 'she's been missing for a year, what did you expect?' and patted me on the head. Not trying to be mean...just not thinking." She was choking up at the memory. "Mom tries, but it's still a *lie*. I wanted to expose them and I didn't even really get to."

"Hey, hey, kid." He set his glass down and turned around, sighing, trying to pull on a sincere face. "You still took them down and you still got closure for the Hollands. The truth is what you make it, that's the truth for them, and it's enough."

"Those *things* could come back and kill more people. We don't know. If people knew about them..."

"All in good time, my young charge. All in good time."

3. Chapter 3

“You drink coffee?” Murray asked, sliding a cup across the table to Hopper when he joined him at the table.

“Yeah. Black, right?” he asked before he took a sip, regarding it warily.

“Of course, I’m not a savage,” he said. “This is an oddly public meeting place for this sort of chat.” The little diner, the only one in Hawkins, which was mostly dominated by fast food chains and pizza that didn’t know if it was close enough to Chicago to bother being Chicago-style and was more of a greasy mess than anything, was not busy on a Monday morning, a few elderly couples holding hands across their tables and talking about their undoubtedly fascinating lives.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he lied, poorly. Jim Hopper was not a great liar when put on the spot. Sure, he could keep *secrets*, but lying? Not so much. “We’re discussing an upcoming fishing trip, that’s all. Remember?”

Murray knew better than to try and be obstinate here. “Oh, right, naturally. Were you thinking Lake Erie?” he led, pausing to order breakfast when the tired looking waitress came up to them.

“Lake Michigan is better this time of year,” he said. “Ever been ice fishing?”

“Can’t say it’s a big pastime in Highland Park, no.” He had not been a particularly outdoorsy child and he had not been raised by particularly outdoorsy parents, either. One failed attempt at being a boy scout was all he had under his belt.

He smirked. “It’s great. Pack warm.”

“Nancy Wheeler came by the other day,” Murray said after the silence had stretched on too long and too awkwardly. He hated silence. “I think she’s on the way to becoming a good little journalist,” he added jokingly.

Hopper groaned. "God, that's the last thing I need. Another fucking journalist," he said, but his eyeroll was uncharacteristically good-natured. "She's a real hothead," he added. "She has to get that from her mother."

He had never met Nancy's mother, but what information he'd gathered about her from Nancy and general chatter led him to the picture of a perfect blonde Republican housewife; bake sales and PTA meetings and all that entailed. Not a lot like Nancy at all. "Really, you think?"

"Ted Wheeler is a wet piece of pasta with no sauce. Nancy is *all* Karen. That or she's the milkman's kid."

"You seem impressed with her." Hopper was all grit and rough edges, but it seemed like a gang of teenagers had turned the formidable police chief into nothing more than a doting dad trying to force them to mind their curfew.

"She's a good, smart kid. They all are. They wouldn't have survived what they've survived if they weren't."

"Your paternal drive is endearing." Back to topic. No time to waste. "When are we going on this fishing trip?"

"How does next weekend look for you?"

"I'm sure I can shuffle around my many appointments," he said, thanking the waitress for their breakfasts as she set them down. "I haven't had a chance to look into that *fish* you want, but I will before the trip," he said, intending to make a few calls and visit a few libraries between then and Friday.

"Good. Glad things are working out," he said, turning his attention to his bacon. "I asked for more than this," he muttered. "Every time."

"What?"

"I tell them I want all the eggs and bacon they have. They never believe me."

Murray couldn't help but laugh, and Hopper actually joined in too.

“But I was being serious,” he said when they recovered.

4. Chapter 4

There was literally nothing skeevier than a middle-aged man with a beard, driving a van, knocking on someone's door looking for a seventeen-year-old girl.

But here he was.

One knock.

Pause.

Two knocks.

Ted Wheeler answered the door after a ludicrously long pause, slowly eating a sandwich, looking perplexed.

"Nancy," was all he said.

If Ted Wheeler was concerned that a middle-aged man was there to see his teenage daughter, he didn't show it. "She in some kinda trouble?"

"No. I'm a teacher," he lied. "She wants help with college preparation." Shit, Nancy was only a junior. "Can never start too early."

None of what he said seemed to register with Ted Wheeler, who just turned around. "Nance!" he called up the stairs.

Nancy came down the stairs in a flash and was out the door with barely a goodbye to her father. "Could you not have waited in the van?" she demanded, red-faced.

"I mean, I could have, but then I wouldn't have freaked out your dad."

"My dad wouldn't *freak out* if a Russian spy had a gun to my head right in front of him, don't kid yourself," she snapped back, and

Murray didn't think that was strictly true, but it might not have been too far off. Wet pasta indeed.

"So what is this all about?" he asked as they drove away from the suburbs and back into town, stopping at the same diner he had just met Jim Hopper in a day ago. They found a secluded booth, disregarding how suspicious this likely looked.

"How would I go about running someone out of town?"

"We talking ethically or unethically?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

She ordered a tea and he ordered a coffee.

"It doesn't matter which. I just don't want this person in Hawkins anymore."

"Any particular reason? Did they cut your pigtails off on the playground or call Jonathan mean names?" he asked, the right amount of mocking to rankle her further.

Nancy's lip curled. "He's abusing his wife and kids."

That effectively wiped the smirk off his face. "Oh."

"Will you help me?"

"I suppose I'm already stuck here helping the Chief, I might as well do this in my downtime," he said, as if his life wasn't 85% downtime and he wasn't a little bit interested in the unpleasant underbelly of Hawkins that didn't have anything to do with interdimensional monsters and conspiracies. The ordinary sort of evil of man. How poetic. That'd make a good piece, too.

She leaned forward. "His name is Neil Hargrove. He moved here a few months ago from California."

"What's got you on this crusade? Other than your obvious fixation on helping people to assuage your guilt over not being able to help Barbara," he asked, causing her to flush and pause to order a stack of waffles. "I'm not hungry," he told the waitress.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“What?”

“Read people like that.”

“I minored in psychology. It’s not an innate skill.”

“Can you teach me how to do it?” she asked, lowering her voice.

“I can try, I guess.” He had never tried to teach someone basic intuition and reading people, but Nancy was one of the smarter people he’d encountered since moving to Hawkins, so if anyone could do it, it was probably her. “It always helps to get to know a person. It’s not a Sherlock Holmes thing where you look at someone and know their whole life. That only happens in bad movies.”

She nodded, rapt.

He paused and considered her suddenly open admiration and attention with the correct amount of suspicion. “That was an excellent deflection from a question you didn’t want to answer, Miss Wheeler.”

She looked flattered, and relented. “My little brother has a friend, Max. She’s Mr. Hargrove’s stepdaughter. His son Billy torments her. He tried to run Mike and his friends over in his car and he tried to attack them because Max was spending time with Lucas.” Her look was significant. “Max doesn’t say much but I think her stepdad is probably just as bad as Billy. Or worse.”

“So you’re protecting your brother and his friends? How sweet.”

“*Of course* I am. He’s my little brother and some greased-up dickhead tried to kill him and his friends. He tricked my mom into telling him where they were, and she’s upset about it. It’s not right. He beat Steve to a pulp for defending them, too!” His laundry list of crimes were serious, especially for an eighteen or nineteen-year-old kid.

“So are we after the father or the son, here?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Why not both?”

He was too impressed not to smirk a little. “You are *ruthless*, my girl. I can make some phone calls. Your best bet would be to take your concerns to Hopper and listen to that suburban gossip I’m sure your mother loves so much. It often reveals more than you think it will.”

Nancy nodded, distracting herself with her waffles. “I do appreciate you helping me. I’m...kinda glad you stuck around.” It sounded difficult for her to say, so he didn’t think it would be right to lean into the sappiness and make her more uncomfortable.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m *serious*.”

He rolled his eyes, trying to avoid any sentimental feelings that might be gathering in his chest. She was a good kid. “Don’t mention it.”

She nodded.

“Seriously, don’t mention it. I have a reputation as a real hardass. I can’t have anyone thinking some doe-eyed kid has made me all sentimental and mushy.”

Nancy laughed and ate her waffles, completely ignoring his protests. “Okay, *sure*.”

“I feel like you’re not listening to me, Nancy.”

“A very keen observation, Murray.”

“You’re a real jerk sometimes, you know that?”

“The feeling’s mutual.”

He took his fork and helped himself to a large, stolen chunk of her breakfast.

“Asshole.”

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

one day i said to myself "you know what's better than two people you ship sharing a bed? frenemies sharing a bed" soooooo you're welcome.

also the creators of the show have said that El's departure from Chicago made Kali understand her own actions were driven by senseless hatred, so in the weeks since season 2, she's done a little soul-searching and has come out a slightly less extreme person. I feel like it needs to be said since this fic isn't in her head to describe that.

also thanks for reading??? this is such a weird, self-indulgent little story (but a slight variation on my season 3 predictions!)

The Friday that they had agreed to meet up was cold and just a touch snowy. Luckily, neither of them were uncomfortable in snow, though snow in the countryside was vastly different from snow in the city.

He was sure Hopper felt it too, having been a big city detective for all those years.

“Packed warm?” Hopper asked, pulling off his gloves and putting his hands against the heaters in the van.

“Packed snacks?” he shot back.

“Was gonna stop at Melvald’s on the way out of town actually.”

“Too see Mrs. Byers?”

Hopper didn’t deign to answer, and they packed into the van in silence. They had agreed that the police truck would be oddly conspicuous considering his three-day fishing trip vacation, so they left it in Hawkins. Jane Hopper was safely installed at the Byers house with strict “stay put” instructions.

They went into the store and each loaded up on snacks and drinks for the road. Driving meant no booze, which meant this was liable to be a dull car ride to Chicago.

“I don’t think we’ve formally met, Mr. Bauman,” Joyce said when she rang him up. It was true that they hadn’t, but between his interaction with Hopper and his interaction with Jonathan, plus everything he knew about the Will Byers case, he *felt* like they’d met.

“I don’t think so. It’s...nice to meet you, I suppose,” he said as he pulled out his wallet to pay.

“Thank you for helping Jonathan and Nancy last month,” she said, sounding too sincere for comfort. People in small towns made Murray feel self-conscious.

“It was more to help myself than anything, if I’m being honest. But sure, you’re welcome.”

Joyce’s eyes were shrewd, and she just nodded. Until she turned to Hopper and her smile turned warmer by about a hundred degrees. Hm. So they weren’t looking at an unrequited situation, here, as he’d first suspected. Hopper paid, and she waved goodbye to them.

“Have fun!”

“Yeah, happy Chanukah,” he replied.

“Hey, you too!” Joyce said, a little bit of sass in her voice, but when he looked back she was grinning.

“How’d you know Joyce is Jewish?” Hopper asked when they got outside. “How much spying did you do?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I did not. I was trying to be a dick.” Mostly he’d discovered that people who celebrate Christmas, *especially* in small towns, hated being told ‘happy’ anything other than Christmas, and he found no small amount of delight in that. It helped wipe away some of that damned earnestness he was so tired of.

“I think you kind of suck at being a dick, Murray.”

Too true.

Instead of responding, he just started their drive to Chicago, not particularly looking forward to the return to the city where he'd become a disgrace and lost his family and reputation, but still idly fantasizing about his victorious return, no longer a joke or a disgrace. It wasn't going to happen. Journalism was too harsh for that. But a guy could dream. He actually hadn't even been in the state much. Since the drop of the story he had been lurking around Hawkins a lot.

"So how long have you been in love with Joyce?" he asked, innocently just wanting to make conversation (he swears!).

Hopper choked on his drink, but recovered quickly. "Does that ever work on anyone?"

"I mean, it worked on Nancy."

"She's a *child*."

"That did probably have a lot to do with it now that you mention it. Question still stands," he said. "Stop deflecting."

"I'm not deflecting or in love with her." But his face was too red to ignore.

"Uh-huh."

"No more talking until we get to Chicago, how about that? Just...no more talking." Hopper looked desperate for silence, and while a spiteful part of Murray wanted to keep talking, just to make up for all the times Jim *refused* to listen to him, he also didn't want to be murdered and thrown into Lake Michigan, so he agreed to keep his mouth shut.

They found the neighborhood that Jane or El or whoever she was had described to them, stopping at a dubious looking sandwich place that Murray had some passing familiarity with from his days with the Sun. He was sure it was a cover for something, but a sandwich was a sandwich.

"So how hard do you think this girl is going to be to find?"

"It's a big city," Hopper said. "But... Hopefully not hard."

"I did a little digging on Martin Brenner," he said, not particularly concerned about being overheard in this dingy little sandwich shop. "He's 58, born in Washington, DC. Died last October, though we suspect that to be untrue. He has several undergraduate and graduate degrees, all in physics or physics adjacent fields. He worked at the Hawkins laboratory for twenty-five years until his alleged death."

"Any other traces?"

"I do have his fingerprints and a promise from an old contact that if they get run through the database I'll get a phone call, but that's about where the trail ends."

"He'd have burnt those off when he died," Hopper said, with an unnerving level of confidence. As if to say, 'that's what I'd do', and Murray found that he'd probably do the same. Paranoid minds, and all. "Maybe this Kali remembers more about him. She was older than El when...when it happened."

Neither of them were quite comfortable naming it torture. Child abduction. It was a little unpleasant. So they ignored it.

They paid way too much for an unsatisfying meal and set back out in the dead of a cold Chicago night. Murray couldn't imagine it was going to be easy to find this girl, but before they even made it back to the van they heard the telltale click of a gun.

"You said you knew Kali?" someone asked behind them. Turning around and seeing a lanky dude with a foot-high mohawk wasn't precisely what they'd been expecting, but hey, Murray had learned to expect the unexpected.

"We're looking for her."

"You cops?" he asked, growing increasingly agitated.

Well, Jim did look like a cop, even in street clothes. It was the jawline.

"Concerned parents," Murray lied, before Hopper could completely

flub this for them.

“Whose?”

“Jane’s,” Hopper said, because it wasn’t a lie at that point.

He didn’t seem to know what they meant, but a dawning look of realization followed. “Wait, Shirley Temple?” he asked, a little amazed. “She’s okay?” He was lowering the gun now. “If you’re really Jane’s dad...I can take you to Kali.”

Hopper nodded, pulling out his wallet and flashing a picture; he and Jane posing awkwardly for (Murray assumed) Joyce’s camera.

“I’m Axel.”

“I’m Jim, this is Murray,” he said. “Do you want us to drive, or you?”

“You, I guess. I walked.”

So they loaded into the van with this Axel character and he directed him through a maze of city blocks and warehouses until they parked behind a particularly dingy looking building and were led inside and up a flight of rickety stairs.

Four others were gathered around a little fire in the room Axel led them into.

They both instinctively displayed their hands. “We’re friends,” Murray said, taking over the reins of dishonesty from his dear incompetent police chief. “Of Jane’s.”

“This guy says he’s Jane’s dad,” Axel explained to the group, grabbing Hopper’s wallet from his back pocket and throwing it to someone in the shadows, who examined the picture. “Says he’s lookin’ for ya.”

A girl came out of the shadows, her dark hair streaked purple, looking at the picture as if she’d seen a ghost. “Jane’s all right?” she asked.

“Jane’s fine. For now.”

Murray saw her fist tighten around the wallet and he looked at Hopper and mouthed ‘what are you doing?’

Hopper shrugged in response, looking oblivious.

“That sounds like a threat, you idiot,” he hissed under his breath. Then he straightened back up. “We’re *worried* she might be in trouble.”

“Because of Brenner?” Kali completed, once she understood. She threw the wallet back. “My name is Kali. I am Jane’s sister.”

Hopper nodded, fully accepting that his white Indiana-born daughter had a British-Indian sister living in Chicago without a moment’s hesitation. Stranger things had been happening.

“You’ve met Axel.”

“Nice fellow.” Murray couldn’t stop himself. Kali snickered when Hopper looked at him with death in his eyes.

“This is Mick.” A tall woman nodded to them. “Dottie. And Funshine.”

“Funshine. That your birth name?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.”

Kali did not look particularly impressed by the banter. “So what is it that you want?” she asked.

“Could we talk alone?” Hopper replied.

She nodded and led the two of them up one more flight of stairs onto the roof. A ratty couch and several uncomfortable folding chairs dotted the roof, it was clear they spent some time up here. “So you believe *he’s* alive.”

“We do.”

“Why? Jane certainly thought he was dead,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

Hopper was struggling to find a good explanation, and actually looked at Murray, as if he could absorb some skill with words. “I just want to cover all of my bases. If he’s dead, we’ll find out and we’ll know you and your sister are safe. If he’s not dead...”

“You’ll find him and bring him to *justice*?” Kali asked, her tone almost mocking.

“If by justice you mean a bullet between the eyes,” Hopper said, and his tone was so resolute that Murray squirmed uncomfortably beside him. He never really had a stomach for violence or death.

She barked out a laugh. “I don’t need your protection. If he comes for me, I welcome the opportunity for justice *and* vengeance.”

“And what if he comes for Jane?” Her grin evaporated. “She’s strong but she’s still a *kid*. You’re her sister,” Hopper said. “I want to protect my family. And in some weird way, that means you too. So, do you know anything that can help us?” he demanded.

Murray pulled out his notepad, going almost unnoticed by the two hotheads in front of him.

“Do you have the address of the man from the laboratory?”

“She didn’t remember the address, just the name.”

“Then I can give you that. And...she told me she found me in her mother’s things. I’m sure her mother had more research on that monster than any of us could ever find. You might be suited to speak with her.”

“Terry Ives is catatonic,” Murray pointed out.

“Her sister will give us the research,” Hopper contradicted. “Hopefully.”

“Fair enough.”

"You can sleep here and set out in the morning, if you'd like," she said. "We only have one extra bed, I'm afraid. Figure it out amongst yourselves."

They walked back downstairs with that, and Kali showed them the little corner room with the spare mattress in it. She lingered in the doorway.

"You know, Jane could find him for you if you asked her."

"I would never ask her to do that," Hopper said, and Kali smiled.

"That is incredibly kind of you. I do appreciate you looking out for Jane," she said. "She...she taught me a lot when she was here. She's a very strong girl."

"She's my daughter. I have to look out for her," he said, as if it were just natural to plot the assassination of a government official for the safety of your child. Murray supposed it was. He would probably do it.

"As strong as she is...as strong as *I* am..." Kali paused. "I worry it'd be easy for someone to forget she's only a child." Maybe someone had forgotten that Kali herself was a child too, somewhere down in there underneath the dark makeup and cynical voice.

"I'm doing my best."

"Sleep well."

She shut the door and they had to confront the issue ahead of them. No more time left to stall. "So who gets the mattress?"

"Me," they both said, glaring.

"I *drove* here," Murray pointed out. "I deserve to be comfortable."

"The only reason you're here at all is because of me!"

"As far as I see it, that's just another point in my favor!"

Hopper paused, and his face fell. "There is one more option."

Realization. Terror. “Absolutely not.”

“It’s snowing, there’s no heat and that blanket is thinner than your hair. And I honestly don’t trust that Axel guy to not come in here and kill us in our sleep,” he said, begrudging. “It’s probably the best way.”

Murray relented. “So we share?”

“Back to back, Bauman. No funny business.”

“No funny business,” he said, agreeably, shedding his coat and glasses.

They laid on the bed, back to back, one ragged blanket between them, and Hopper’s revolver comfortably close underneath the flat, hard pillow. At least he was warm, Murray supposed, before he fell asleep.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you all had great holidays!

In the morning, they agreed to never speak of the fact that they had woken up with Murray's face pressed into Jim's shoulder.

They left Kali and her gang first thing in the morning, going to see Roy Carroll, a man who, according to both Kali and Jim, had electrocuted Jane's biological mother into insanity. To say Murray wasn't looking forward to it would be something of an understatement.

A modest apartment building.

A fat, red-faced man looking uncomfortable at the very sight of them.

They sat on a squishy-soft couch while he fumbled around to make coffee. Did Jim notice the man's hands shaking? Murray did. In spite of all of his first few impressions of the man, he didn't believe Hopper to be stupid.

"I'm Jim Hopper," he said. "Chief of Hawkins PD. This my associate, Murray Bauman."

"You're far from home," Roy Carroll said, sipping his coffee. His speech was a little forced. "What's this about?" He was on the verge of nervous stutters.

Jim leaned forward, trying to look personable, but disgust was pulling at the corner of his mouth. "You worked at Hawkins Energy Lab, didn't you?"

"I retired five years ago, but yes," he said, nervously stirring too much sugar into his cup.

"My daughter came to visit you last month; do you remember her?" he asked. "Goes by Jane sometimes? With a girl named Kali?"

Roy Carroll paled so quickly and apparently that no lie he could tell would ever hold weight. “I saw her. What is this about?” he demanded, finding his spine somewhere in that over-sugared cup of coffee.

“You tortured her mother into catatonia,” Hopper snapped, clearly out to fluster him.

It worked. “I – Brenner said she was sick. I was just following orders.”

Murray rolled his eyes so hard he could nearly feel his retina detach. “Because that justifies it. Historically we’ve always been fine with people just *following orders*.”

Hopper didn’t let up. “When Jane came to you, you told her that Martin Brenner *trusted* you, and that you could tell her where to find him,” he said. “Would you be able to do that for *me*?”

“I would rather tell her. Cops can’t do anything...” He was lying now, and not well. “She and her sister can handle it themselves.” That was odd and out of place...as if he had been waiting for a place to insert that into the conversation.

Murray slung his arm over the back of the couch, getting a noise of irritation from Hopper when his hand grazed his shoulder. “You think we’re here on police business?”

He shrunk back. “I suppose not.”

“So let’s ask straight up. Where’s Martin Brenner?”

“Indianapolis.”

The information was given readily and too confidently for a man that was a stuttering, shaking mess two minutes ago.

He tapped a pattern into Hopper’s shoulder, as if to the background Christmas music.

Dash.

Dot Dash Dot.

Dot Dash.

Dot Dash Dash Dot.

T.

R.

A.

P.

“Thank you, Mr. Carroll,” he said, getting off the couch and shaking off Murray’s arm. “And thanks for the coffee.” Their exit was abrupt, leaving the man stammering goodbyes and not knowing what to make of them at all.

Murray didn’t say goodbye, simply followed Jim out into the cool morning air and watched him light up a cigarette. “Brenner got to him,” he said.

“No shit,” Hopper agreed.

“I would say he heard about their little visit, assumed they’d be back and told old Roy to make sure they knew where to find him. To whatever end.” It was also clear, however, that Roy Carroll resented being the bait designed to lure two teenage girls to torture and death, and wasn’t interested in hiding how compromised he was, either. Who knows what would happen with him now that he had dispensed his wisdom to the wrong people.

“To reopen the gate, or worse,” Hopper said, chewing on his thumbnail. “Let’s head back. We’ll stop in at the Ives’ house on the way into town.”

Murray agreed, having no sassy retort or sarcastic comment to go on. Either they had gotten what they needed and were on their way to finding this Dr. Brenner, or they had just been misled directly into a trap and now Brenner knew they were poking around. It was a lot of variables to consider and, goddammit, he wished he had a drink so

he could slow down and go through all of them.

Instead, all he could do was make the drive back to Indiana and try piecing everything together.

Becky Ives' house was modest but unkempt. It had the feeling of strain to it. He knew the feeling well.

"Oh, Chief Hopper!" she said, surprise plain on her face.

"Hey Miss Ives. Can we talk for a second?" he asked.

"On the porch okay?" she asked, slipping out of the house and shutting the door behind her. Murray's suspicion was already heightened. He remembered Nancy's excuse for not wanting to call him from her house.

He exchanged a significant look with Hopper, who nodded the slightest amount, aware that they were once again playing into the trap Brenner must have set for Eleven.

"I hear Jane visited you last month," Hopper said. "I hope she wasn't much trouble."

Becky didn't look precisely relieved, but there with a trace of a smile on her face. "She was an angel. What is this about?"

"Jane mentioned when she got home that Terry had some research, back from when...when she was taken. You kept it locked up, she said. Do you think by any chance we could have a look at it?"

Relief took over this time, though, and she nodded. "Take it all with you."

"Miss Ives...has someone else been here looking for Jane?" he asked. Then he paused. "I'm sorry, Murray Bauman, I'm a...friend of Hopper's. Private investigator." He stuck out his hand and she shook it, her grip firm.

"I'll be honest with you, someone *did* come by, saying that they were looking for a runaway teen who broke into some guy's house in Illinois. I knew immediately they meant Jane, even though they

didn't say. Me and Terry are getting out of Indiana once and for all. I'm sick of them poking us. They've already ruined our lives, I don't appreciate them trying to use us as bait for that little girl."

"Did you tell them anything about Jane?"

"Just that she stayed her for a few days and seemed like she needed help. I didn't mention Terry or ...the TV...or whatever. Just a strange kid crashing here." She was shrewder than she let on. "I'll give you Terry's research and then I'm done. I don't want any of this...and I don't want anything to happen to Jane..."

Hopper nodded. "We appreciate it."

She disappeared inside and came back with a stack of folders. "Take it. Burn it. I'm tired of what it's brought us."

"Where will you go?"

"We've got cousins in Maryland. Maybe there," she said, shrugging. "I just wanna get the hell out of dodge, Chief. If this Dr. Brenner is looking for her, who knows what he'd do to Terry or me if he thought we'd be of use to him."

"We appreciate it, Becky."

She smiled at them, strained and too tired for her age. "It's the only thing we can do."

They left her alone with that.

"That was easy," Hopper said, then paused. "Please don't say too easy."

"Okay, I won't," he said, but he thought it. "Brenner knows that Jane has some inkling he's alive. And Kali too. He's pursuing loose ends who might help her find him with the anticipation that she'd be working alone or only with her sister."

"So us poking around is good?"

"I mean, Carroll is going to tell him and we're going to have targets

on our backs immediately. But at least your kid is safe.”

“That was oddly sincere, Bauman.”

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t wish harm on a kid just because you’re a dick, Hopper.”

“Well, you never know.”

“But really, this means one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to find a place in Hawkins while we’re working on this.”

“Oh God, what have I done?” Hopper asked. Then he paused, his face contorted in painful realization. “I have been looking for someone to take over my place in town. I never sold it. It’s been mostly empty for a year.”

“Good, that fleabag motel was starting to give me a rash and my place is depressing as fuck.”

“Nancy mentioned that.”

“She’s so *mean*,” he lamented, lighting up a cigarette. He wasn’t much of a smoker, but something about Hopper compelled him.

7. Chapter 7

The move from both motel and his actual house into Hopper's didn't take terribly long. Just the better part of two days. Most of Jim's stuff had been evacuated over the course of the last month, now that he was living in the cabin with his daughter in earnest, and a lot of things Murray owned he didn't care to take with him.

So he tidied up to the best of his motivation and put up his posters, starting a new wall for the Brenner investigation.

Jim Hopper, unlikely ally and landlord, was sitting on the porch with a beer, watching the water as he finished up. It was a nice view, though Hopper was regarding it with a dark expression. The times he'd spent in this place had probably been the worst of his life, like how Murray felt about the Illinois house.

"I have this contact," he said. "Works for the lab, or did. A doctor. I'm going to ask him if he knows about Brenner."

He could only respond with skepticism. "Think he'll be honest with you?"

One lesson they'd all learned; don't trust these assholes.

"He forged paperwork so it looked like El was legally my daughter, I trust him more than the average suit."

Sounded fair, but he still didn't trust it fully.

"I'm going to call him and if I have anything for you, I'll come by," Hopper said, finishing his beer, and very rudely leaving it for Murray to pick up later. He left just in time for Nancy and Jonathan to pull up.

"Why did you *move* here?" she demanded before she had even fully exited the car.

"So that I can help Chief Hopper and not waste tons of money and energy driving around the whole Midwest?" he shot back. "Want the tour or something?"

"No. I heard you were here so I came to see for myself," she said. "But I do have some...intel? I guess? On what we talked about."

"Don't call it intel, that sounds stupid." Her face fell a little and he sighed. "Come on inside," he said, letting them in and checking to make sure they hadn't been followed before he shut the door.

"My mom has a friend who's a nurse," she said immediately. "She says that Susan Hargrove has been at the urgent care twice since she got to town. Both times she said she *fell*."

"And you don't think you're simply dealing with a very clumsy lady?" he asked.

"Hopper also found an arrest warrant for Neil Hargrove in California. Domestic battery of a woman named Pam Hargrove."

"That solves the Neil problem, but how are you helping Susan? Him getting arrested might not be enough, you know. Abuse is..." He struggled to describe it, having never been a victim.

"Complicated," Jonathan finished for him, not making eye contact with his girlfriend as he did. Jonathan Byers would know, he supposed.

"Hopper is going to take Neil in to talk with him," Nancy said. "And my mom and Mrs. Sinclair and Mrs. Byers and Mrs. Henderson are going to take her out to dinner and talk with her about it. We told them what we thought was happening... If they can't convince her... I'm not sure. But at the very least...I mean. We can get rid of *him*."

"Even if it means Max and her mother having to follow him back to California? Max still having to live with Billy?"

Nancy grimaced. She was a smart girl, but the nuances of adult relationships were still foreign to her, she hadn't considered that Susan might not be *ready* to divorce him. To teenagers, relationships were so easy to fracture.

He felt like he needed to give her a break. "It's good work, though. Did what you could. I did look him up for you before we left town, and found most of the same stuff. He apparently has a somewhat long

arrest record for minor violence and so does Billy. Billy's mother fought for custody, but someone convinced the court she was unfit. She filed the charges after that and Billy was too old for it to matter, anyway. Once kids hit a certain age they can pick who they live with."

Nancy ran a hand through her hair. "I hope it works," she said.

"Me too, kid."

"Did you find what you and Hopper were looking for?" Jonathan asked.

"A little bit. This Dr. Brenner character might have resettled in Indianapolis. That's all we've got, right now. He's looking for Eleven, however, which means it's important to untangle this web and quickly. He'll come back to Hawkins before too long. Especially since our informant will probably immediately tell Brenner that Hopper has her."

"So now you're protecting the town?" Nancy asked, not sardonic but a little mirthful at the notion.

"I don't know if I'd put it like *that*," he said, but that's kind of what it was. This tiny peaceful town (that he'd begrudgingly grown to like) had been besieged by the supernatural and very few people were smart enough to see it, so he felt like he had a responsibility to it. "Call me if I can help you anymore with the Hargrove stuff, I guess. Don't act like just because I'm staying here you can drop by whenever you want, though," he said, knowing that she would, and that he wouldn't even mind when she did.

8. Chapter 8

He went to buy groceries and when he got back from that little errand, Nancy was sitting on his porch, hugging her knees and looking a little tired.

He wasn't sure if he should play annoyance or concern, so he just unlocked the door and let her in, going about putting up his purchases while he formulated some kind of a response. Sometimes it was hard to know what to say. He had been on his own for a while, talking to other people was a rusty skill.

She cut to the chase, thank fuck.

"The Hollands are moving," she said. "Someone put an offer in..."

They had known the Hollands were selling their house for months now. He didn't feel *too* badly for his role in that, but looking at Nancy's open misery, something like guilt got to him.

"The government gave them a huge settlement," she said. "Why would they still need to sell their house? You didn't ask for more money, did you?"

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous," he said, though it wasn't a ridiculous line of thinking at all, and if he'd been a worse person and better capitalist he might have tried to get more from them. He'd gotten his own settlement money, however, and hadn't given it a thought. "Did you ever consider maybe they just *want* to move?"

She was sitting on the sofa, a holdover from Hopper's furniture, picking at loose threads. "Barb grew up there. *I* grew up there. If they move...someone will come in. They'll paint over the stupid stuff we carved into the walls. They'll change the wallpaper and cut down the bushes we helped Mrs. Holland plant..." Nancy wiped her eyes, clearly humiliated. "I know you don't care, but Mrs. Byers was at work and so was Jonathan..."

That stung. Was Nancy Wheeler that short on people to talk to? "I don't...*not* care," he offered, pathetically. "I'm sorry. But you're being

selfish Nancy. They're allowed to move on. They deserve it. Those memories you wanna cling to is probably the stuff of their nightmares."

"I *know*."

"So then what's wrong with you?"

The crux of the issue was not the Hollands. She understood trauma. She understood the pain of losing Barb and how it might make some people hide. Nancy never hid from anything, but she knew that she was unique in that way. Something else was eating her up.

"My dad got a job in Indianapolis," she said, taking a shuddering breath.

"So you're moving?" Moving was stressful for kids. It was why he'd given up the house in the divorce.

"No. *Just* my dad."

Oh. Well, that was even worse.

He made Nancy a vodka soda and a turkey sandwich, a paltry offering but an offering nonetheless. "You should eat," he said, before returning to fix his own drink, not ready for another adolescent processing divorce in his life quite yet. He had done pretty shitty the first time around.

"I knew they were *unhappy*. Ever since Will disappeared, maybe before. But I never thought my mom would leave. I didn't think she had the nerve to put her foot down, you know?" There was a twinkle of admiration when she stopped to wipe her eyes again, picking at the sandwich. "He told her about the job offer and she told him that she'd already moved to Hawkins and put down roots for him, she didn't just want to leave. But maybe he should. And he agreed! I mean..." She clearly wanted to reason a way that this didn't have to happen, but she had no words for it. "It's Christmas," she muttered.

"That's how these things happen, Nancy," he said, trying to restrain his scoff. She was just a kid, for all her many virtues. Sometimes he forgot.

“You’re divorced, right?”

“How’d you figure that one out?”

“I looked you up.” She rolled her eyes. “Was it hard for you?”

“Harder than anything else I’ve ever done,” he said, grimacing.

“You have kids?”

“Just one. A son. Your brother’s age, I guess.”

She regarded him with bloodshot eyes, and tried to smile. “I’m sorry. You don’t want to talk about it. Telling some stupid girl all your secrets.”

“You’re not stupid,” he corrected. “And, I mean. I can tell you some stuff. If it makes you feel better. But you should eat or you’re going to feel shitty in the morning.”

She took a bite, and he rewarded her with a little glimpse behind the curtain. His personal curtain, not the imaginary societal curtain she’d already torn down and strangled several grown men and the US government with.

Someone had once told him that all his secrets just pushed people away and made them unhappy. He wasn’t sure if that was true, but honesty was something he could give the old college try for, if only so she didn’t get his furniture all soggy crying all over the place.

“I married a neurosurgeon,” he said. “Her name was Rachel. She was still in medical school, I had just finished grad school. We lived in a pretty nice part of Chicago. Then we had a kid, Joey, and it was normal. A little bland, even. Then...well.” He sighed. “Let’s say that if things had been great, what happened with me wouldn’t necessarily have been a marriage ender on its own.”

“So you weren’t happy?”

“It wasn’t *me* who was unhappy. But sometimes that’s the problem. If one person thinks they’re happy and the other doesn’t...neither really is.” He suspected that was the case with the Wheelers. Ted Wheeler

had a great life, by all accounts, he did nothing but go to work and got to claim he was living the American dream while his wife toiled raising three children on her own and had dinner on the table every night by 7.

Nancy sighed, finishing her sandwich and downing her drink. "I don't want to go home tonight. Mike is going to the Byers' after AV Club. Can I sleep here?"

"Feel free. I'll be up all night at this rate," he said, pointing at his own head. "But you should go ahead and pass out."

She sighed. "Mom wants to throw a going away party for the Hollands. I think she's just trying to distract herself from...the whole thing. I don't know if I can stomach it."

"You'll regret not saying goodbye properly, that I can tell you for certain."

"You're probably right." But she sounded resigned to it more than anything.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

why is this fic so long? couldnt tell ya

Jonathan picked Nancy up for school the next morning, as Murray was on the phone with Hopper, who sounded irritated and tired over something. He waved goodbye, oddly reminded of many mornings when his own kid had gone to school in the same way. Waving at the corner of his vision while he attended to work things and didn't pay attention.

Nancy was *not* his kid, he reminded himself.

He was at the station in a few minutes, accepting a breakfast apple from Florence before she bodily shoved him into Hop's office. That woman was something else.

"How much do you think the average citizen knows about interstate extradition laws?"

"How much do *you* know about them?" he shot back.

Hopper took a drag from his cigarette. "Enough to scare the piss out of Neil Hargrove, I think."

"I'd be inclined to agree. What do you want from me?"

"I heard from my doctor friend, about that...aggressive growth we discussed," he said. "Figured I'd tell you, ASAP. Definitely malignant, but..."

He was tapping.

Dot Dash Dash Dot.

Dot Dash Dot.

Dot Dot.

Dot Dot Dot Dash.

Dot Dash.

Dash.

Dot.

P.

R.

I.

V.

A.

T.

E.

He gave the slightest of nods.

Dot Dot Dot.

Dot.

Dash Dot Dash Dot.

Dash.

Dash Dash Dash.

Dot Dash Dot.

S.

E.

C.

T.

O.

R.

Private Sector. Huh. So Brenner had not returned to government service. Fun. That only made this more difficult.

Another nod. "I have some friends who specialize in those sort of growths, let me call them for you," he said significantly. "Any luck with the Hargrove thing?"

"Actually, yes. I pulled him in this afternoon under the guise of community concern. I can hold him long enough for the Fright Pack to talk to his wife while I 'clear some things up' with California," he said, smirking slightly. "Then California officials will request he be sent their way. Hopefully he runs for it, I'd love to actually arrest him instead of just holding him for other people."

Murray snorted. "Cops." If Hopper had his way, he'd do the cowboy cop vigilante thing on everyone he thought deserved it.

Hopper narrowed his eyes. "With that attitude your rent might go up a couple hundred bucks this month, Bauman."

"You're the one who has me working pro-bono, Chief."

He ignored that. "Is Nancy okay? I heard...well. You probably already know."

"I think she's fine. She cried it out on my sofa last night for some ungodly reason, I think that's all she really needed." He kept telling himself he didn't want to get sentimental and these damned small-town folks and their drama kept tugging at his heart strings.

He was glowering. "She trusts you, Bauman. If you take advantage of that, I don't know if you'll live through it." It was a threat, and not an empty one.

Murray tried to suppress a gag at the implication. "Don't be disgusting. Plus, you know she'd kill me before you even had a chance."

He took a moment to nod appreciatively before Florence interrupted them. “Are you ready to take a crack at Hargrove? I got the Sherriff on the line from his old town.”

Hopper sighed. “Back to it. Get back to me about those specialists, Bauman.”

He caught a glimpse of Neil Hargrove when he left and didn’t like the look of him at all. But then, he liked the look of basically no one, and what he’d already learned about the guy was enough to make anyone’s skin crawl.

He stopped by the store on the way home, intent to pick up one or two more things he’d forgotten the day before. He had all the free time in the world to cook, but he wasn’t much of one, so it usually ended up the same thing every week. Maybe he’d get something different tonight.

He didn’t end up getting anything different, and when he was at the meat counter he bumped into someone. He turned around prepared with some kind of snarky comment, but the woman who had walked into him was pretty and notably distracted looking.

“Sorry,” she said with a tired smile. “Completely in my own world here.”

The toddler in her shopping cart demanded her attention and she kept on her way.

“Totally my fault,” he managed to say to no one in particular, deciding against the chicken and settling for another microwaveable dinner tonight. He was too distracted by the new information about Brenner to really care about his own nourishment.

He had phone calls to make.

10. Chapter 10

Research had always been his bread and butter. It was what had made him such a good investigative journalist and what made him a good investigator in general. Putting together the pieces of research took a little more practice, and in the past he'd always had to restrain his kneejerk towards conspiracies.

Now, well, the conspiracies were real, and the devil was in the building.

So he cut loose.

He called zoning boards. He called and yelled and made up fun fake voices, getting far too drunk in the middle of the day as he dialed and dialed and dialed.

The wall of crazy grew and he ended up at Melvald's buying string from a mildly amused Joyce Byers. "You know how it goes," he said, knowing that they both had experienced brushes with the sort of crazy that forced you to redecorate your house.

She nodded and chuckled.

He got back to the house to see Nancy at the door, accompanied by one Steve Harrington, holding a foil-covered dish and looking edgy.

Well that was quite the development.

"Where *were* you?" As if they'd had a standing appointment, or something.

"At the store?" he sassed back, unlocking the door and, against better judgment, letting them in.

"Mrs. Henderson has been teaching Steve and Dustin how to cook, we thought we'd bring you one of their trial runs," Nancy told him when she handed him the dish.

"I can feed myself, Nancy."

“Can you?”

He didn't deign to answer that question, rather turning to them and raising an eyebrow. “So what *actually* brings you here?” He had been *noncommunicado* through the holiday, so he presumed some sort of Christmas miracle had compelled the mini-WASP to his door.

“Well, Mr. Hargrove is gone,” Nancy said, looking positively chipper. “Susan and Max are staying with me and my mom for a bit, and Billy's mom is picking him up tomorrow and Hopper even had his doctor friend write her a note recommending *therapy* for him.” It was a long shot, but he thought maybe Nancy needed something like that to assuage her conscience.

“So he's going to go torture minority kids in California now?”

“At least he's out of our hair,” Steve said, looking a little nervous to be in Murray's presence. “I hope maybe his mom will teach him how to not be a shitty person,” he added, though all three of them doubted it. “I'm Steve, by the way. You talked to my parents a couple of times last year about Barb...”

“I know. It's...nice to make your acquaintance,” he said. Steve wasn't exactly what he had imagined in demeanor. Maybe he'd been imagining the kinda guy he'd openly hated in high school and college, not a kid who brought a total stranger food at the behest of his ex-girlfriend.

Though the ex-girlfriend thing was a question, too, because he definitely had his hand on Nancy's knee while they sat there.

“The stuff you're working on for Hopper, you got any leads?” she asked.

“Actually, I do.” It was hard not to feel smug about the work he was putting in, though the holiday season made it hard to talk to as many people as he needed to. He was getting a little impatient. “We found out from the good doctor that Brenner is probably not working for the government. However, he's definitely looking for Eleven and her sister –”

"Kali, from Chicago," Nancy repeated back, apparently for the benefit of Steve, who may not be as intimately familiar with the whole story.

"Pursuing a former employee named Roy Carroll after discovering that Kali and Eleven visited him." He led them to the wall he had set up, string and newspaper clippings and blurry half-observed photographs. "So I looked at private companies in Indianapolis," he said. "Then of course, you narrow it down to anything with an orientation towards science due to Brenner's post-graduate degrees." He flipped to a few pages in a scrawled-on folder, showing it to them.

"Then you just tighten focus from there," Nancy said with dawning realization.

"But how do you figure this out? There have to be hundreds of companies like that in Indianapolis, it's a big city," Steve pointed out.

"Good observation Steve. I won't bore you with details about publicly traded and how to get this sort of information, but it helps to know people and...well, know how to lie a lot." He smirked. "After you narrow it down to private science labs, you look to see if any of them are in free-standing buildings, maybe with basement space. An office building shared with lots of businesses isn't going to be the target. And you check to see if they've undergone any dramatic restructuring in the past thirteen months. Remodeling or just a lot of new hires or funding, etc."

"So, did you find it?"

"It's a slower process than that, Nancy, so I've narrowed the list but I'm waiting on a few more call backs." He tapped a pen against the wall. "But I've narrowed it down a respectable amount. The right amount."

Nancy chewed on her lower lip, looking at Steve and then back to Murray. "If there's anything we can do to help..." she said. "We can't let anything happen to Eleven. Mike wasn't himself all year while she was gone, I don't want him to go through that again."

Instead of scoffing at her platitudes, he just nodded. "Go home. It looks weird that you spend so much time over here."

Nancy rolled her eyes, leading Steve out of the house without a goodbye.

11. Chapter 11

Two days after Nancy's visit, he met Hopper at the cabin, his folder of research spread out over the little scrubbed wood table. Eleven or Jane or whoever she was sat in the living room, eyes fixed on the television.

"So I'm waiting on two more phone calls but I have three companies that fit criteria that might tie them to Brenner so far. And possibly two more." He handed Hopper the final list. "The biggest trouble is identifying what alias he might use. Ms. Ives' research actually has a list of suspected aliases for the years she was hunting him down, but given...circumstances, it's hard to say if they were real or if he'd be using them now. Most of these companies have a database of employee photos for ID badges and the like, but that's not so readily accessible."

Jim was chewing on the inside of his cheek, nodding along as his cigarette smoldered, forgotten between his fingers. "I can't believe I'm saying this but...good job."

Murray rolled his eyes. "The tone of surprise."

"Can you blame me? You spent months pestering me about aliens and Russian spies."

"Because it was the only thing that explained the gaps in knowledge at the time," he pointed out, feeling a little defensive.

"Really, your go-to explanation for gaps in knowledge is *aliens*?"

"Have stranger things not happened in the last year? Aren't aliens slightly more believable than interdimensional dog-monsters and a shadow hivemind?"

Hopper considered that with narrowed eyes. "Fair enough, I guess."

"So what's your next move?"

"Well, we're going to have to confirm his location. You'll fill in the gaps in the story, and we'll dispatch him. After we collect some

proof.”

He looked over his shoulder at the kid, wondering if talking about dispatching her alleged biological father was appropriate, but she was hardly paying them any mind, playing with the knob on a walkie-talkie.

“You mean we have to go to Indianapolis?” he asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Unfortunately.”

They contemplated this for a moment, and then Eleven interrupted them, pulling on Hopper’s sleeve. The very few times he’d seen her in person, he’d found her slightly disconcerting, but he was starting to think that it was a result of confirmation bias, because she seemed so utterly normal. Maybe slightly immature for her age, but that was perfectly acceptable given the situation.

“Are we going to have snacks at our party?” she asked.

“Yeah, I was gonna get them tomorrow after work. Any requests? Other than –”

“Eggos,” she said immediately.

“Yeah, got those,” he said, good-natured and exasperated.

“Mike said he likes chips and salsa.”

Hopper put on a good show of being very interested in Mike Wheeler’s dietary preferences.

“Having a New Year’s party?” he asked, trying not to grin.

Eleven nodded. “I’ve never had one before.”

Yes, well, he imagined holidays weren’t readily celebrated when you were a prisoner in a lab. “They’re fun. Are all your friends coming?”

She nodded again. “Mike and Will and Max and Lucas and Dustin,” she rattled off. “And Nancy and Jonathan and Steve and Ms. Joyce.”

Murray did try not to grin at Hopper. Really, he did. But it just happened, and Hopper rolled his eyes and scoffed. "You know, during New Years parties, grownups always kiss someone at midnight. It's good luck," he said, his voice slightly conspiratorial.

"Murray," Hopper warned, but the girl had already turned to him with big, hopeful eyes.

"Will you kiss Joyce?"

He tried to restrain his laughter. "Yeah, Jim, will you?"

"You have to ask people's permission before you kiss them, El, so I don't know," he said, deflecting.

"That wasn't a no," Murray told her, and she looked very optimistic indeed. "Also, do you prefer to be called El or Jane?" he asked her very quickly, unable to keep thinking of her as "Eleven or Jane or whoever".

"My friends all call me El," she said. "Aunt Becky and Kali call me Jane."

That only barely cleared it up, but he could work with it. "Well, I'm not your aunt or sister, so I'll go with El, too."

"Okay," she said, then her walkie-talkie beeped and she walked off to confer with Mike Wheeler. Watching her retreat, Murray kind of understood why Hopper and Nancy were so dead-set on keeping her safe. He wanted to, too. She was a nice kid.

"She is not going to let that kissing thing go," Hopper said, his tone grave.

"Well, you need to get it over with anyway," he said, both of them full well knowing that he intended for El to never let it go. "It's obvious you're in love with her."

"Bob's barely cold in the ground, Murray, I'm not a monster," he said. "Do you move in on grieving widows? Is that how you get dates?"

"I haven't been on a date in sixteen years," he said dismissively.

“Your concerns are valid and all but after a while you’re just denying yourself happiness based on a highly subjective frame of time without a thought towards what Joyce might actually want or need.”

“You should quit this job and become a newspaper advice columnist, Murray,” he said.

“You laugh, but that gig helped me afford grad school.”

“Of course it did. Mind your own business, I don’t need love advice from you, of all people.”

“Because we’re both middle-aged divorcees trapped in a government conspiracy together?” he asked.

“Don’t say it like we have so much in common, people will think we’re friends,” Hopper groaned.

“Jim, I think we *are* friends.”

12. Chapter 12

The new year came and went. Murray continued to find different ways to get information on the handful of companies that were prime candidates for hiding Martin Brenner from them, all while allowing Nancy to sit in on his research sessions, sometimes with Steve and another attempt at a casserole (steadily getting better) and sometimes with Jonathan.

“Will you pick me up?” she said in the phone as soon as he answered.

He hated picking Nancy up. He drove a van, she was sixteen, it was all together an unfortunate combination.

“Sure.”

She was sitting on the curb outside her house when he pulled up. There were cars filling the driveway and the lights were on.

“It was the Hollands’ going away party tonight,” she said as she got in. “It’s mostly over. I made it through. I just...”

He waved off the excuses. “Want diner food?”

She nodded, and sighed. “My dad moved out almost a week ago. He came back for the party to keep up appearances. Having Mrs. Hargrove and Max around has been really nice, though,” she said in a distant, sleepy voice. “It’s weird my mom seems so much happier already. She even went down to play Dungeons and Dragons with Mike last night. She’s usually too busy for stuff like that.”

“Well, she did just shed two hundred pounds of dead weight. Can’t blame her for being happy.”

Nancy laughed. The all-night diner just outside of Hawkins wasn’t particularly busy, but at least it wasn’t fully empty. He hated empty restaurants. They both ordered waters.

“They leave next week. Florida. ‘Somewhere the sun shines,’ Mr. Holland said,” she said in a dreary voice, sipping a sweet tea and clearly trying not to cry. “I know it’s for the best. But.”

“That doesn’t mean it can’t still hurt a little,” he said. “Pretty normal experience growing up.”

She scoffed.

He ordered hash browns, not being particularly hungry, only offering food as a solution to distract Nancy.

“Your thing with Hopper?”

“Nothing new to report. Things are quiet.”

She nodded, almost disappointed by the lack of a distraction.

“I gotta ask –” he started, regretting it before the question was even out of his mouth. “Are you stringing Steve along?”

“What?”

“I mean, I see you two when you come over, you know that right? Arms around shoulders, hands on knees. It seems very unbroken-up-like. And. I mean.” He couldn’t believe he was investing this much mental energy into a sixteen-year-old he wasn’t related to and her love life. “Not to be the boring old guy or anything but they’re both nice kids and you shouldn’t lead them on.” He had stirred the pot with her and Jonathan because it was entertaining to watch them squirm, but now he was – ugh – Nancy’s friend and shit-stirring wasn’t the goal anymore.

“I’m not leading anyone on,” she said, equal turns sheepish and defensive.

“So you’re *not* dating Steve?”

“I mean...”

“So you’re not dating *Jonathan*?”

Nancy was beet red and looked as though she wished she was melting into the cracked plastic of the booth.

“Both of them?”

She jerked her head in what might have been a nod.

Murray had opened Pandora's box and now he so heartily regretted it. He didn't need to know. Didn't *want* to know. But morbid curiosity was compelling words to keep coming out of his stupid fat mouth. "They know?"

She nodded again.

"Okay, now, let's forget this conversation ever happened and never speak of it again," he said, fixing his eyes on the potatoes in front of him and not the teenager he'd just accidentally humiliated.

He wasn't interested in how that arrangement worked nor did he want to keep thinking of it, so he knew he needed to divert the subject – and quickly.

"So...the weather has certainly been cold!" he said, though that was a pathetic deflection.

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

this fic is sitting completed in a word document so i'm basically just going to be posting at-will at this point. thank you to everyone who has read this self-indulgent nonsense that literally happened because i fell in love with brett gelman on instagram.

January died a shuddering, frosty, sludgy death. No news was reported, and Murray found his research was stuck at the point of “physically going to Indianapolis and peaking in windows to find him” stage, which both he and Hopper were putting off. They had heard nothing of Roy Carroll or Becky Ives, and Hopper’s good doctor had provided no further insight.

There was no reason to go charging in yet. Maybe he’d given up his aspirations of child soldiers.

That didn’t necessarily mean he didn’t still deserve to die. But then, Murray always answered the question of “would you kill Hitler even when he was a baby” with a fairly resounding yes, and most people found that slightly uncomfortable.

Murray would leave that to Hopper’s judgement. (He couldn’t believe he’d just thought that.) The truth was he didn’t have a dog in this fight, not really. He liked El, she was a sweet kid who deserved better than Brenner, and Nancy certainly thought him obligated to help, but this was Hopper’s kid. He was just along for the ride.

He and Hopper met up with Sam Owens, the good doctor, at a bar one evening.

“I believe you,” Owens said, not believing them at all. “All of our intelligence points to Brenner being dead, but if he’s been contacting people, then clearly something’s up. It could be a trick by this Carroll fellow, but...”

“That’s a ridiculous thought. This guy was a patsy, a total schlub,”

Murray said. "He'd have no use for those girls and telling them Brenner is alive doesn't accomplish anything for him personally."

"Which is why it seems plausible, but between the relocation and my forced retirement, what I've told you is all I've got. I'm a simple country doctor."

That was a lie, and they had to share a chuckle at any of them being a "simply country" anything at all.

"I can tell you one thing, however. He won't be able to open a gate in Indianapolis. They're fully location dependent. The labs are strategically placed where the barrier between their world and ours is thin enough to make a gate. So by faking his death and staying away from the other energy labs...he's keeping himself from the potential to open a gate."

His voice was low, barely registering over the music, and they were leaning in to listen.

"Is there a chance he could open the Hawkins gate remotely?" Hopper asked, a cheese stick in his hand.

"Maybe? Not all the way. And without Miss Jane's gifts, it's unlikely he'd open it at all. The lab is fully monitored now that's abandoned – no one goes in or out without someone being notified, so he won't try to break in."

"Unless he knows he'll succeed," Murray interjected.

Owens conceded that. "So he'd have to know he could get the girl down there. Keep her away from him at all costs and he's just a mad scientist with expensive toys."

Jim considered this very seriously. "You got it, doc."

He smiled.

The lights flickered in and out for a long few seconds, causing a hush in the bar.

"No need to be paranoid, when it's this cold outside, that can

happen,” Dr. Owens said, though he wasn’t convincing anyone with that. However, he was right in that one little light flicker was hardly cause for alarm, even in Hawkins.

“I should go get the kid from Joyce’s before she hunts me down,” Jim said, throwing some cash on the table to pay the tab. “Later, doc. Later, Murray.”

“See you around,” Murray said, pulling out his wallet. He didn’t open it, though, trying to mentally calculate exactly how much money he even had left.

“So you’re the guy who exposed us with Nancy’s little tape?” the doctor asked, looking shrewd, but still the same grandfatherly man they had been chatting with for an hour or more. He didn’t have the seeping malevolence that came through Martin Brenner’s pictures, no. He certainly understood why Hopper had decided to trust this man.

“She did all the work, doc. I just mailed some letters.”

“I suppose I should be angry about losing my job,” he said, tossing his napkin down and gesturing to a frazzled waitress for their check. “But it was a clever stunt you pulled.”

Murray shrugged. “I’m a clever guy, doctor. So is Nancy.”

“She is. It’s probably good she’s got someone like you to teach her how to handle herself. Jim’s a good guy but less patient. If she learned too much from him, it would be bad for all of us.”

He laughed as he pulled on his coat. “She’s already pretty shoot-first question-later, I doubt I have that much of an impact,” he said. “I’ll let you get the check, doc. Have a good one.” With that, he excused himself from the bar and went back home, mentally cataloging the information that Owens had just given them so he could write it down later.

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

ok i never claimed this was anything other than self-indulgent nonsense gimme a break

“I’m gonna make a drive up to Indianapolis to check out the final contestants,” Hopper said. “I should go alone this time,” he added.

“So that if anything happens to you, I can carry on your brave legacy?” he shot back a little mockingly.

Jim rolled his eyes. “Sure, that.”

“I’m of course, very disappointed to not be going to Indianapolis, but I’ll hold down the fort,” he said.

Hopper hung up on him. He expected the chief’s bad mood was a result of a Valentine’s Day passing without a move made on the lovely Ms. Byers, and certainly not from their continued proximity. Really, they were starting to like each other.

A little.

Jim had the research with him, or at least copies of it, it seemed useless to hoard it when Hopper was going to be doing the muscle work on this case. So there wasn’t much to do but sit around the house idly, flipping through the limited channels he got, and drink –

Except he was *out* of alcohol.

How had this happened?

Murray double checked all his cabinets and he didn’t even find the repulsive beer that Hopper kept in the fridge for their strategy meetings.

He would have to go...*out*...for it.

Disgusting.

It was lucky he'd showered that day. He managed to will himself out of his pajamas and into normal person clothes. He could be around other humans for a tiny little chunk of his usually solitary day. It would probably not suck.

By the time he got to the lone bar in Hawkins, he wasn't so sure this wouldn't suck. This was a backwoods redneck bar in a backwoods redneck town and he wasn't drinking and watching sports with the police chief, so he stuck out a little more than he had on previous visits. (He wasn't much for football, but when the Bears played he always watched.)

But he was already there and had nothing better to do with his evening, so what did he have to lose?

He ordered a vodka soda and sat in the corner, far enough away from the jukebox to hear his own thoughts. It wasn't dreadfully crowded, but the thrum of people talking combined with the music gave it that typical bar loudness.

A drink or two and then home. He could go shopping in the morning, so he didn't end up in this situation again.

He wondered if Hopper would call him when he was back from Indianapolis. Probably. Ugh, what had he turned into? Sitting around wondering if someone would call him. Sure, it was about the end of the world and not the spring dance, but it still felt pathetic.

Murray found distraction in one of his favorite bar-related sports from college, cock-blocking aggressively drunk dudes. He had perfected the art of ruining a guy's evening and then disappearing into the night. Too many of his friends had tried to use his powers for evil (ie. To hit on the woman being unwillingly hit on in the first place) so he'd stopped doing it unless he was drinking alone. And there he was, drinking alone.

A guy at the bar was leaning precariously over a bar stool, ineffectively wooing the two women next to him. Finishing his drink, he walked over.

"I heard you're both gettin' divorced," the guy was saying, because

that was certainly the best way to hit on someone. "If you need a rebound thing..."

They were exchanging amused looks at the prospect when Murray slid into the empty spot between Mr. Charming and his prey. He ordered another drink, and turned, making a good show of pretending to recognize them.

"Long time no see!" he said, grinning. "I've been waiting about ten minutes, didn't realize you were already here!"

That alone was usually enough to send someone scampering.

"I didn't realize you were waiting for company," the guy said, taking his beer (and two drinks he had presumptively ordered for the ladies) and slouching off.

"You don't know me, don't worry about trying to place me," he said quickly, because nine times out of ten women picked up on the game, and one time out of ten they were just a little too tipsy to see the deception for what it was.

He took his drink from the bartender and stood back up.

"You could sit with us for a bit if you want," the blonde said. "I mean, just to make it convincing. Lorne means well but he talks a lot when he drinks." She smiled, and her friend smiled too. They had a very buttoned-up suburban housewife vibe between the two of them, both drinking brightly colored drinks out of martini glasses.

"Okay, sure," he said. "I always forget that this is one of those 'everyone knows everyone' towns."

"Where are you from, then?" the redhead asked.

"Chicago."

They shared a somewhat teasing look between the two of them, and Murray rolled his eyes and turned back to focusing on his drink.

"Sorry. I'm Susan," redhead said.

"I'm Karen."

"Murray," he said. In some darker times, he liked to give a fake name at the bar, but he lived here now, so it seemed useless to even try that.

"What brought you here from the big city?"

"Just needed a change of environment," he lied. "What brings you out to the bar on a night like this?" It was cold, and snow was on the forecast for the week, which meant little to Midwesterners, but their overwhelming mom-vibe made him feel like they were blowing off preparing their precious Jakes and Eddies for the weekend of sledding and shit.

"Celebrating."

"The divorces, I presume?" he replied, jerking his thumb back towards poor, rejected Lorne.

"Of course. My friend Claudia spent a month celebrating once her divorce was finalized. Honestly, it's been years and she might still be celebrating. I always thought it was a little insensitive until it happened to me, and now I get it," she said.

He laughed as she and Susan clinked their glasses together, though that had never been his sentiment about breakups, more power to them. They both finished their drinks and Susan made a face.

"I'm such a lightweight Karen, I think I need to head out," she said, putting a hand on her head. "You ready?"

"No, take the car and I'll see you in the morning," she said, fishing keys out of her bag. "I'll be fine getting home."

Murray didn't think anything of it, turning around and not presuming that he was welcome to pester a recently divorced woman trying to have a good time. Plus, he was a realistic guy, sitting next to a supermodel.

He ordered a third drink.

She ordered a second.

Silence.

She looked his way once or twice and he tried not to immediately return the gesture. She was probably just bored, and he didn't look too busy.

"So what is it you do?" she asked.

He didn't want to get pegged as the only journalist named Murray who had stepped foot in Hawkins, so he lied just a tiny bit. "I'm a writer."

"Oh! I went to college to become a writer," she said. "I didn't finish, but I always dreamt...but, you know. It was silly. Fiction stuff. Do you write --?"

"Journalism. You should still write, if it's something you enjoy, the world needs more people writing who actually like it, and not just people out to make money." That was weirdly cuddly and optimistic for him, maybe it just wouldn't particularly serve to be rude to a stranger. Or maybe he was in a good mood. Probably not that one, actually.

She grinned. "I never thought there was much money in it. I was a dreamer. Life always finds a way to mess with dreamers."

Murray, who had never been what anyone would ever call a 'dreamer', could only quietly nodded in agreement, listening attentively. That seemed to cause her no end of delight, and he vaguely wondered how much her ex-husband had ever listened.

"Now that life's not so crazy, maybe I will start up again. Just for fun, I mean." If only she had any idea about a crazy life.

"Are you always so self-deprecating?" he asked, not trying to be rude but definitely being rude anyway.

She didn't look particularly offended. "Probably. I'm learning a lot about myself in the past few months. Like, I'm a doormat, easily manipulated, too forgiving. Or if you ask my ex-husband, the exact

opposite of all of those things.”

“I had the same experience during my divorce,” he said, abruptly feeling very candid. What in the hell was he even doing? He was probably going to bump into this woman around town constantly, and neither of them were drunk enough to feign ignorance when that happened. This was going to get embarrassing. “Like, how long I could live off microwaveable food.” Last minute deflection.

“Which is?”

“Not long, it turns out. I almost got scurvy.”

She laughed, and it would have been a great joke if Murray had been kidding, but that had been a rough few weeks for him. That was when he started drinking screwdrivers, for the vitamins.

She had a nice laugh, and really a nice everything else, but he made it a rule to not ogle women in public. Mostly out of respect, and partially to make himself look better than other people. It usually worked.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

He had to check to make sure she wasn’t talking to someone behind him. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, my house isn’t too far...unless you’d prefer –”

Thinking of the depressingly insane state of his house, he shook his head. “Your place is better, I live on the lake. Little bit of a drive.”

“Let’s grab a cab, and I can bring you to your car later,” she said. Maybe if she knew he drove a van, she wouldn’t be so hasty to bring him home. He wasn’t about to look gift possibly-sex in the mouth, though, so he said nothing, and she walked over to the pay phone on the wall and called for a cab.

He was mildly surprised that Hawkins had a cab service and that it ran after dark, but according to the advertisement on the side of the phone, it ran until midnight, and they were coming in barely an hour under the cut off. What a relief.

Murray had always been fascinated by how different it looked riding in the backseat of a car versus driving. He was sure he had been in this neighborhood, but he was a little tipsy and couldn't remember how. So he paid the cabbie and he and his new friend snuck inside a dark two-story house.

There had been some red flags that evening that maybe he would have picked up on if not distracted and the slightest bit drunk. Signs that this was a situation he probably needed to pull up from.

Murray did finally notice the red flags when (a respectable time later thank you very much) he had to cut on a lamp to find the bathroom.

And the light illuminated a school picture of one Nancy Wheeler lovingly framed and placed on a vanity next to the lamp.

"*Shit*," he muttered to himself, shutting the light back off, double checking that he had successfully put Karen to sleep (he had, thank you very much) and grabbing his shoes to sneak out of the house before any of the Wheeler children noticed his presence.

Only to open the door to see Nancy crossing the yard to, presumably, climb into her bedroom window after a night of gallivanting around with her two boyfriends.

"Murray?" she hissed when she heard the door shut. Damn her youthful night vision.

"You're mistaken."

She stalked over. "What are you *doing* here?"

"What are you doing sneaking in at –" He checked his watch. "Almost two in the morning!" He wasn't her dad, he wasn't her dad.

"Why were you *in my house?!?*"

Jonathan was idling at the curb, watching this unfold.

"Don't worry about it."

"Hang on," she said, her eyes wide. "Were you there with –"

Something on his face must have given him away.

She punched him on the arm. “You slept with my *mom*?”

Murray walked past her without confirming or denying her suspicions. “Jonathan, you want to be a dear and give me a ride to the bar on your way home?” he asked as the Byers boy rolled his window down to see what the kerfuffle was.

Steve was in the front seat, looking delighted.

Goddammit.

Murray slid into the back seat and Nancy followed.

Goddammit.

“Nancy, go home before you worry someone,” he said.

“You’re the one sneaking out in the middle of the night!” she hissed. “I can’t believe you did that to my mom!”

“*With* your mom, she was present for it.”

Nancy looked like she wanted to gag. “I can’t believe you!”

“In my defense, I didn’t realize she was your mother until after. I never would have –”

“Oh, now is there something wrong with her because she’s a single mom?” Nancy asked, now suddenly torn between her revulsion at the act and defending her mother’s honor from perceived slights. “Why would you just leave in the middle of the night?”

“Would you rather have caught me now or at breakfast, Nancy?” he shot back.

She did not have an answer to that, and it was a blissfully short drive back to his van.

“I can’t believe *you slept with my mother!*”

Sometimes, honesty was the best policy. “Neither can I, let’s never

“speak of it again.” While it had never been in his nature to cut and run from these situations (he had been, admittedly, the unbearably clingy type well into his 20s), Karen Wheeler most certainly was not his type of woman, and he most certainly was not her type of man. This was an accident that was best never spoken of again.

She nodded in agreement, and in the front seat Steve and Jonathan were very uncharitably laughing uproariously.

15. Chapter 15

He woke up one morning and there was a kitten on his porch. It stared at him and Murray contemplated shooining it away. He glared. The kitten walked up and rubbed his little orange face on Murray's pajama pants. Sighing, he bent down and picked the kitten up. It let him and reached for his glasses when Murray raised it to eye-level to inspect it. A little scrawny and fur a little matted, but healthy looking enough.

It meowed in protest when he lifted it a little higher. Boy cat. Okay.

"Well, you wanna live here?" he asked. He'd always been a cat person. Something about the independent, solitary nature of the average housecat appealed to him.

This cat was not solitary or independent. He set him in the sink and made the valiant effort to rinse him off. He seemed to like the water, he purred when it was warm enough. So this cat was by itself because it was a stone cold weirdo. Relatable.

"Okay, kiddo, that better?" he asked, rubbing a hand towel over his fur.

The kitten pawed at his face, and he took that as a yes. He didn't have much in the way of plates or bowls but he had a teacup that he filled with water.

There was a bang on the door and tiny kitten claws dug into his leg in shock. He leaned down to pull the kitten up and walked over, opening the door and finding Nancy Wheeler, tight-lipped and raising her fist to knock again.

"I ne – where did you get this kitten?"

"He just showed up," he said, letting her inside with a sigh.

"What's his name?"

"He showed up fifteen minutes ago, he is nameless."

“Aww, did the mean man get you all wet?” she asked the kitten as she took him from Murray, rubbing his head while he meowed. The traitor.

“He liked the bath. And how mean can I be when I rescue kittens?” he asked.

She sat down on his sofa, still cradling the cat. “There’ve been two power outages in the town in the past week, it’s really weird,” she said. “No bad weather either.”

Murray nodded. “Florence mentioned that when I went to see Hopper yesterday.”

Nancy was frowning. “About this thing with my mom –”

“There is no *thing*,” he said. There had been four days of frosty silence between his last encounter with Nancy and now. “It was a rebound fluke. Don’t worry about it.”

“You discussed that with her?” Ha, as if that was necessary. How naïve.

“No.” Jokes about not doing a lot of talking came to mind, but he felt like he shouldn’t traumatize the kid further. “But it’s obvious. That is a woman who is so out of my league that we don’t even play in the same *country*. She’s in the Olympics and I’m on the little league baseball team coached by my drunk rabbi.” He paused to get a glass of water, offering one to Nancy as well.

“My mom’s not shallow,” Nancy protested. “I used to think maybe she was, but we’ve been talking more lately, I think you’re being insulting.”

“I think I’m being realistic. Your mom is a smart woman, but she got divorced a couple of months ago and probably just wanted to get laid. I’m fine with that, she’s fine with that, you need to be fine with that. She’s not my type, I’m not hers.”

“So you’re saying it’ll never happen again?” she asked, daring to look hopeful.

"It's *never* gonna happen again," he said with all the solemnity of a promise.

It happened again that afternoon.

He hadn't meant for it to happen, he had gone to get the kitten some food (securing the furry beast in the bathroom while he was gone) and litter and of course he'd bumped right into Karen Wheeler. It took them both a moment to recognize the other in fluorescent light and not the flatteringly dim light of a bar.

Pleasantries were exchanged, and they both went on their way.

But they were on the same aisle as each other every time they turned around. And there was a sort of veil of awkwardness descending between them by the time they both ended up at the same register.

So naturally they ended up in the back of Karen's modest station wagon parked around the back of the store.

"That was fun," she said, straightening her hair.

Murray was too busy thanking whatever god there was to thank for the blessings he'd been getting to respond immediately, but she seemed to interpret that positively as well.

"I should really get that food to this cat. I just found him this morning," he said after a minute.

"See you around?"

Checking that the coast was clear before he conspicuously removed himself from the back of a car, he nodded. He wasn't sure why he said what he'd said, after already breaking a promise to Nancy. "Definitely."

It was a small town, after all. It wasn't like he was lying to either Wheeler woman, really. Not intentionally.

Well, now he was just lying to himself.

16. Chapter 16

“So, I’ve narrowed it down,” Hopper said, letting himself into the house.

They had talked about Indianapolis a few times since he’d returned, but after a second trip, it seemed that they had run out of choices. “Oh?”

“Yes, RealiSci,” he said, pointing to Murray’s wall. “I saw him there. He dyed his hair but it was him.”

It was a long, quiet moment while they both contemplated this. On one hand, they had a location and could easily go find and dispatch him, on the other hand, he was hours away, maybe he would never return to Hawkins.

Fat chance.

A plaintive meow interrupted Murray’s thought, the cat demanding breakfast he’d already scarfed down.

“Shut up, Jim.”

“What?” Hopper asked.

“Oh, no, I named the cat Jim,” he said, picking him up to show him to Hopper. “He just looked like one.” It was wickedly petty, which Murray had never claimed he wasn’t.

“I never said you could have pets,” he said, frowning as he took the offered cat, who immediately sank his teeth into his beard, one of his favorite pastimes. “Especially not ones named after me.”

Murray rolled his eyes. “Okay, you throw him out then,” he said, as if he wouldn’t immediately let the furball back into the house when Hopper left. The chief made no such moves, instead letting Jim the cat settle into his arms and purr.

“Fine, he can stay.” Then he paused, looking down at the kitten. “Maybe when all this is done, El can come play with him.”

“Sure,” Murray said reflexively. It was far too nice and familiar for the pair of them, but maybe life would settle down soon. He just needed to resign himself to being stuck here.

“Do you think we can find a way in the RealiSci building?” he asked. “That’s what I came to ask about.” He set Jim the cat down on the carpet and he ran off to play with the cheap toy mouse Murray had supplied him.

“Probably. I can investigate it, at least.”

“We should go down there next weekend, if you can do it.”

“Sure.” He wasn’t sure why he was being invited on this trip when Joyce was the natural option, or even Jonathan and Nancy. He supposed his role as the only other adult (and probably not much of a babysitter) had something to do with it.

The lights flickered, as they had been lately.

“Yeah, this weekend.” With that, Jim the person excused himself from the house and left. Jim the cat looked sad he’d gone so soon, without giving him a treat or anything.

He didn’t have much luck finding a way into the building that didn’t involve breaking all the reflective windows that led into the lobby. They might have to extend their weekend trip and do a physical stakeout to get anywhere productive.

On Thursday, he didn’t think much of a knock on the door. Hopper had called earlier and expressed an interest in stopping by.

Only, it wasn’t Jim Hopper. It was Eleven, by herself.

“Come inside,” he said, looking around either for signs of the chief or anyone who may have followed the little psychic. “What’s going on?”

“Hopper never came home from work,” she said. “He said 5-1-5. 5:15.” She was agitated.

It was six-thirty.

“Did you call Joyce?” he asked, his head trying to run through every possible scenario here.

“She didn’t answer. Hopper showed me this place, I thought he’d be here.”

Jim the cat made himself known, rubbing against Eleven’s jeans. She balked at the little creature – had she ever seen one? If she had, was it a positive experience? – and then stared at Murray. He had no idea what to do with this little, formerly feral girl in his living room. “You can hold him if you want, he’s friendly,” he said.

There were tears in her eyes when she gently scooped up the kitten. “I’m sorry,” she said, almost inaudibly. So, not a good experience with cats.

He was about to come up with a plan that involved dumping the kid off with Joyce and hunting down Dr. Owens with the phone rang.

“Hello?” he asked, hoping and expecting Jim Hopper on the other end, frantically asking where his daughter had run off to.

“Mike’s missing!” Nancy all but screamed into the phone. “He didn’t come home from school! He’s not at Will’s or Lucas’s or Dustin’s!”

Murray wasn’t sure how he had managed to be in the middle of this drama, but he was somehow realizing that things had been happening outside of his own narrow awareness – with Nancy, with the kids, probably with Joyce and Hopper as well – and now it was all starting to coalesce into something too big for one or two people to worry about.

“Where’s the girl? Max?”

“She’s with me. They were supposed to walk home together and he never showed.”

“Where’s your mother?”

“At the store. I can convince her he’s at Will’s for like, a night or two, maybe, but...”

Murray looked at Eleven, who looked more alarmed than she had a moment ago. If she knew Mike Wheeler was in imminent danger, she would run off without thinking. He needed to play this cool.

“We’re going to the Byers’, meet us there,” he said.

“We?” Nancy managed to ask.

“Hopper’s missing, too. I’ve got Eleven.”

His first call after leaving Nancy with that was to Melvald’s General Store. “Joyce! It’s Murray Bauman. When does your shift end?” he asked, not even letting her get a word in edge-wise.

“Uh, seven?” she said.

“Good. I’ll see you at seven, then,” he said, hanging up. “Get in the van,” he told Eleven. “You can bring the cat if you want. His name is Jim. So...it’ll be like Hopper is still here.”

She squeezed the cat a little tighter and nodded.

“We’re going to meet everyone at Joyce’s house. Okay? So you can stay with Will.” She didn’t notice the slipup of neglecting to mention Mike. His thinking was that Joyce might be able to talk her out of any foolishness. Maybe. He knew better than to underestimate the disciplinary powers of a Jewish mother, at least.

He paused.

“Is there any way you can get in touch with that sister of yours?” he asked.

17. Chapter 17

Watching Eleven ‘go away’, or whatever it was, was a truly surreal experience, and he understood why Hopper wanted to avoid it, as she wiped her bleeding nose. She was mouthing words, but no real sound was coming out, and he was forced to listen to the white noise of a staticky television.

“I don’t know if it worked...” she said. “And I tried to find Hopper but I – ”

There wasn’t much need to explain. He suspected that they wouldn’t find Hopper until Brenner wanted him found. If anyone could interfere with Eleven’s gifts, after all. “At least you tried. That’s what matters.”

With that, they left for Joyce’s. They arrived just as Joyce pulled up; Nancy, Jonathan, Steve and all the children were on the porch waiting. Conspicuously missing Mike.

He got out, Eleven in tow, and walked straight to them, outpacing the thirteen year old. “Do not say anything about Mike yet,” he said in a low voice. The confusion of moving the group from outside to in would cause enough of a stir. He held Joyce back, let all the kids go inside, and locked the door behind them.

“Joyce. Hopper’s missing, Mike too. You have to calm El down when she –”

“Where’s Mike?” she demanded after a few minutes of mumbling and adjusting. She turned to Nancy, her big dark eyes terrified.

How were they even going to handle this shit?

The lights were flickering every few minutes and it was starting to give him a migraine. Joyce looked from Murray to Eleven, nodding slightly and walking over to the girl.

“We have to get him! Where’s Mike?” she was shouting now, her fists tight and her face furious. The flickering lights might have been her,

now, and not just the gate-related power surges.

“Sweetie, Mike is probably with Hopper,” she said in a low, gentle voice. “We’ll get them back, but you need to calm down first.” This did nothing to stop the stream of frustrated tears. “You can’t go do something reckless and get hurt, Mike would be so upset, right?”

“Papa has them!”

“We don’t know that.”

Murray tried to resist contradicting that. Instead, Nancy had walked over to him, looking grim. “Do you know Hopper’s doctor friend?” he asked her. “The one you spoke to at the lab?”

She nodded. “But I don’t know how to get in touch with him.”

Neither did Murray. Why hadn’t he asked for a fucking business card?

“Maybe...maybe she could find them for us,” Jonathan said, his voice uneasy. “Then we could go get them.”

“There’s no ‘we’ in this situation, you’re all children,” Joyce said. “And Eleven doesn’t have to use her powers if she doesn’t want to.”

Murray agreed, but he didn’t get a chance to say anything before Eleven stood up and, for the second time that evening, unwound the bandana from her arm. “I already tried,” she said miserably. “I couldn’t see him. But maybe I can try again?”

“You don’t have to,” Joyce reiterated. “But if you feel up to it, let’s try it again.”

She fiddled with the television, but there was too much commotion in the room for her to focus.

“Everyone SHUT UP,” Max yelled over the din, successfully bringing silence to the packed living room. “Let her focus!”

He liked that girl. She was spunky.

Joyce motioned Murray into the next room, her lips pressed tight.

Only now was her own worry showing through, for both her son's friend and her partner in parenting. "Any ideas?" she asked, pitched with panic.

"My guess is Hawkins Lab, but...we need to find out how long they've been missing," he said. They could be halfway back to Indianapolis by now, if their luck was shitty. A pause. "We need to stay calm for those kids."

"I thought this was over. Will's finally...and now..." She was pulling out a pack of cigarettes – Hopper's brand – and lighting it, hand's shaking.

There was a gentle knock on the open door. Will Byers was standing there, dark-eyed and slender. Murray had never seen a son so starkly resemble his mother before. Eerie. "Sorry. Uh, Eleven found them. She thinks." He was uncomfortable, clearly, and that told Murray everything he needed to know.

"I saw them! I think – I think it's the lab!" Eleven barked, confirming Murray's suspicions as she pulled her shoes back on.

"Not so fast, young lady!" Joyce shot back. "You are not going anywhere!" It was almost a miraculous shift from nervous wreck to terrifying mother bear, but Murray wasn't the least bit surprised. "You are a child and I am responsible for you!"

"Why can't she fight?" Lucas demanded skeptically. "She's way more kickass than any of us," he added.

"She's already exhausted just from that," she said, and it was true that El's two consecutive trips to the void had her looking pale. However, the middle schoolers seemed to feel they could argue with Mama Byers.

Murray, who had never spoken a word to any of these kids and was only there by virtue of Nancy's misplaced faith in him, had to step in. He was the only other grownup there. "This is a *trap*," he said.

"Trap?" Eleven repeated.

"You mean..." Dustin started. "This Brenner guy kidnapped Hopper

and Mike to lure El to him?” he asked.

Murray pointed in the affirmative. “Smart kid,” he said, and Steve covertly ruffled Dustin’s hair. “Doc Owens told us these dimensional gates are location dependent – meaning that the energy lab in Hawkins is one of the only places in the country where the gate can be opened. He took them to the lab –”

“Because only El can open the gate back up,” Lucas and Dustin concluded, sharing a worried look with Max and Will. “And she’ll come and get them.”

Eleven didn’t look deterred. “I am still the only one who can save them!”

“No, you’re not. Not this time.” Nancy said. “We can do it as a *team*. Without the gate, Brenner’s just one guy.”

“Nancy, Jonathan, Steve. I’m positive that Hopper has an arsenal in his cabin. Mind the trip wire and go fetch it,” Murray said, exchanging an agreeable look with Joyce. “Kids, stay here and distract yourselves.”

“What are *you* going to do?” Joyce asked.

“Well, when Nancy comes back with a shit-ton of guns, someone is going to the energy lab to fetch our chief.”

“I’ll do it,” Joyce said. “You can look after the kids.”

Murray wasn’t sure if he preferred being an executioner or a babysitter, so he didn’t comment, instead presumptuously rummaging through Joyce’s cabinets for wherever she stashed her liquor. The teenagers had gone, and the preteens were attempting to distract themselves with the kitten, but there were mutinous mutterings all around.

They would try to escape to handle this one their own – he wasn’t naïve.

He only hoped a solution to their anger presented itself before too much longer. He didn’t think Mike Wheeler and Hopper were in

much physical danger, at least not until Brenner realized that Eleven wasn't just charging in there to fetch them.

If he thought that Mike and Jim were the girl's only links to this world, he was sadly mistaken, Murray mused while watching her friends attempt to console and comfort her, Will leaning on one of her shoulders.

"You can't go in there alone," he said to Joyce once he found an extraordinarily dusty bottle of gin.

"Are you much use in a fight, Murray?" she sassed, letting him pour her a tiny drink.

"No, but I'm not 5'2", either," he said.

"Jonathan and Steve can come back me up."

"Nancy won't let you take them without her and I don't know if I can keep these kids from tying me up and running off by myself." Without the authority that Steve or Nancy held over them, he didn't stand a chance. He was a stranger to all of them except Eleven, and he was clearly a traitor in her eyes right now.

They sat together at the kitchen table and contemplated this (exchanging increasingly farcical plans to calm their nerves) until Nancy, Jonathan and Steve returned with a black duffle bag containing a rifle, a shotgun, and a handgun, along with other odds and ends. They laid it all out and stood back to admire it.

"We don't know what kind of numbers Brenner has," Jonathan pointed out. "And we don't know if any of them will come for Eleven if she doesn't show. What do we do?"

"Wait," he said, as the plan formed in his head. "We wait the night and see if they come for us. We charge them in the morning if they don't. Let them sleep on this shitty plan."

"I hope you're planning to release another piece about this," Nancy said. "Because it's golden."

"I do smell a Pulitzer in my future," he lied. "Did you tell your

parents you were here?" he asked, addressing all the underage attendants. "Specifically, here?"

They all nodded.

"Good." That means no more missing children for the night.

"When are we going?" Eleven demanded loudly, having spent ten minutes trying her faithful walkie-talkie to no avail.

"There is no 'we', young lady!" Joyce retorted. "*You* are staying safe so your father doesn't have to worry!"

The wait until morning was restless and difficult. It was three AM when headlights illuminated the front window of the Byers house; a single black car pulling up and idling too long as the motley crew gathered in the living room watched intently.

The driver side and passenger side doors both began to open slowly when another pair of blinding bright headlights came up the driveway and a giant white van plowed into the black car, pushing it and barely missing Joyce's beater in the process.

"Who is that?" Lucas shouted, but Joyce jerked the curtains closed quickly as gunfire erupted.

It was a tense few minutes; even Murray didn't feel like peeking to see what the carnage was when the door finally opened, but he had hope.

"Sorry we're late," a familiar voice said lightly.

Eleven was first to her feet. "Sister!"

Kali Prasad stood in the doorway, the shadows making her tall as life.

"I think we found your backup, Joyce," Murray said with an appraising look at Kali's gang. Joyce was shocked, but there might have been a thrill of excitement in her eyes. Like her Chief, she was clearly desperate for an excuse to kill the man who had tormented their children for too many years.

18. Chapter 18

“So we storm the lab, take out Brenner’s men, retrieve your Mike and your chief, and kill Brenner?” Kali said.

“Easy as that,” Joyce said in agreement, as if any of that was easy.

“Steve and I should go too,” Jonathan said. Steve was leaning on the spiked baseball bat, eying Kali with transparent interest.

“Without me?” Nancy demanded.

Joyce stood up, Hopper’s shotgun in hand. She was loading it, her finger’s still shaking, but her face determined. “I’ll go with Kali and her friends,” she said. “Jonathan can come too. Steve and Nancy, stay here and protect the house in case they send more goons. And clean the mess up outside. Murray, you’re on babysitter duty. Not one step out of line for any of them,” she said, passing him a taser they had found at Hopper’s house.

“Are you giving me permission to taze these children?” he asked hopefully.

“No! That’s for any intruders, you idiot!”

“Name-calling wasn’t really necessary,” he muttered.

Joyce rolled her eyes, but she was also coming closer to a smile than she had all night. She snapped the shotgun back into place and Murray understood why Hopper was so obviously in love with her. “Let’s go, then.”

The seven of them left without much else, other than Kali stopping to hug her sister and promise to return. The big one with the mohawk was giving Joyce the same look Hopper did. He wasn’t going to like that competition at all.

Eleven was still enraged. He could see it seeping out of every pore as she sat between Max and Will, holding both of their hands tightly to ground herself. She had to trust that her big sister would save her boyfriend and be quiet and she didn’t like it at all.

“It’s late, maybe you should get some sleep,” he suggested, but they were all too wired. They would crash quickly soon, and he was praying it was soon-soon because he was too old to pull all-nighters anymore, and there was probably no cocaine to be found in Hawkins. (He was also too old for cocaine.)

Instead, the kids bombarded Eleven with questions about her sister, which at least seemed to distract her from impotent rage. She would have to learn what being a kid meant eventually, and that meant letting the adults who loved you take care of things instead of thinking that you had to handle shit yourself. Superpowers or not, thirteen-year-old girls weren’t bulletproof.

Once the topic of Kali diminished, silence came back over them.

“We could finish teaching Steve and Max how to play Dungeons and Dragons?” Dustin suggested.

“But we don’t have a dungeon master...” Will chimed in, looking concerned. He was clearly worried about his brother and mom, though he was focused on trying to comfort Eleven. Sweet kid.

Murray wondered if their shared experience with the other dimension had bonded them to each other.

“I can Dungeon Master,” Nancy said. “I think I remember how to do it,” she said. “Do you have any of your books?”

Dustin had in fact packed several D&D books, as if this were a sleepover and not a reaction to a hostage situation. They picked an easy one for Steve’s benefit, and he gamely played along with the kids’ enthusiasm. Max was clearly emotionally invested in the proceedings and trying to hide it and maintain the “too cool for school” air she had so carefully cultivated.

That left Murray to wander about the house with his gin and his taser, listening for anything odd and looking for anything out of place. It was a miracle they had snatched Hopper en route and not at his place, or closer to the cabin where they might have found El, too.

The power was still intermittently flickering.

He could hear the ‘oohs’ of the kids and the rolls of the dice.

When he walked back out, Max was wiping away a tear.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I really liked Horsebot,” she whimpered. Apparently, they had killed Horsebot, the little monsters.

Nancy was as ruthless a Dungeon Master as she was a reporter. That was good to know, he supposed.

“You don’t have to stay, we can watch them alone,” Nancy told him a few minutes later. Dustin had dozed off mid-campaign, and Will and Eleven had gone to find blankets to construct a pillow fort. She and Steve were politely lounging on the couch together. Steve’s bard, Evets, had died a horrifying death early in the game, but he didn’t look too shaken up.

“You would never find my body if I left now, Joyce would put me through a wood chipper.”

Nancy looked thoughtful about that. “You think they can handle this?” Worried about Joyce and Jonathan.

“They have a Chicago street gang led by a psychic teenager with them. I legitimately couldn’t be less worried,” he said, though it wasn’t true. RealSci was the largest of the companies they had suspected Brenner of joining, it was hard to say what sort of resources were at his disposal. “Now that they’re asleep, we should probably handle the corpses in the driveway,” he added, remembering the instructions they’d been left by Joyce. He locked the door behind them, finding the admittedly obvious spot that Joyce kept her extra key. He wanted to hear if (when) the kids tried to make their escape.

Kali’s group had indeed killed the four suits that had been sent to the Byers’ house, and with a lot of grimacing on his part and steely resolve on Nancy and Steve’s part, they managed to shove four uncooperative corpses into the wrecked car.

“What should we do with it?” Steve asked. Nancy fumbled around,

producing the keys to the car.

“How about we drive it into a ditch a few miles down the road?” she suggested.

“You two take care of that, then, I’ll go inside and stay with them.”

“There’s probably a gas can in the shed,” Steve said ominously, which sounded very much like a plan to torch the car. Good plan, as far as Murray was concerned. But he was cut-throat like that.

Inside, he found Eleven sitting up, amongst her sleeping friends, clearly lost in thought.

“What if they get hurt because of me?” she asked.

“It won’t be because of you,” he said, not sure if this was a grammar lesson or comfort. “It isn’t your fault that Brenner is doing what he’s doing.”

“It is, though. Papa wants me to come back. If I weren’t here...he wouldn’t have Mike or Hopper.”

“But neither would you,” he pointed out, which seemed to amaze the little girl. “And you know, you don’t have to keep calling him Papa.”

“What should I call him?”

“I don’t know, Dickhead? Whatever you’d like. He’s not your dad.” Even if all signs pointed to him being her biological father, that didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

“Dad? Like Hopper?”

“Yeah, exactly like Hopper.”

She smiled a little. “Dickhead. What does that mean?”

“It’s just a word for someone who is awful.”

“Like mouth-breather?”

“Yeah, but worse. For people who are *really* bad.” Hopper would kill

him for teaching her how to swear, but she did need to learn it eventually. When he'd been a teenager he'd always taught the younger kids in temple to swear, it was only thing that made it bearable as a moody adolescent.

She nodded knowingly, getting up and sitting next to him on the couch. "Will Nancy be back soon?"

"Yeah, yeah. She didn't go too far."

That seemed to sooth a little of her anxiety, but one of her legs was still bouncing unconsciously as they waited.

Nancy and Steve returned, smelling vaguely singed, and tried to enter the house quietly, but the jostling of the doorknob seemed to set off a chain reaction of waking everyone else up.

"Sorry," she whispered as she crossed the room. "Just us, go back to sleep. No news yet."

She sat down and put her arm around Eleven's shoulder. "You okay?" she asked. As typical as Nancy and Mike's relationship was for two teenage siblings, it was clearly killing Nancy to not be able to go out there and find him in that moment. Comforting Eleven was all she had.

Eleven nodded and got comfortable against Nancy's side. It wasn't long before everyone except Murray was asleep, and he was rapidly approaching it too.

He wasn't sure what time it was when the crunch of gravel woke them. It was daylight outside, but still morning.

A black car was in the driveway.

Murray found the taser, trying not to raise the alarm as he got off the couch, watching through the cracked blinds.

To his great relief, it was Joyce Byers exiting the driver's seat, a raggedy gang behind her, and Jim Hopper carrying a sleeping Mike Wheeler into the house.

He opened the door before they got to it and let them inside. While everyone looked worse for wear, they were all alive and in one piece. Hopper deposited Mike on the couch next to Eleven, and the pressure seemed to stir her, and then the rest of them followed. Their joy over the return of their friend was the pure, uninhibited kind you only felt as a kid. Nancy was crying and refusing to let her brother go, even though he was clearly grumpy about being woken from his nap.

Eleven launched herself at Hopper like a missile, and swallowed Joyce up in the embrace as well.

“Take Axel inside, sweetheart, I’ve got a sewing kit in the back and we can sew up that cut,” she was telling Mick. “How about breakfast?” she asked Steve. He nodded and waded through the sea of preteen hugs to find the phone. Kali and her gang surrounded Eleven, and she shifted from one hug to another, giving Hopper and Joyce a moment to breathe.

“Thanks for looking after them,” Joyce said.

“They’re angels,” he lied. “It was no trouble.” That part, slightly sincerer. “So, was the mission a success?”

“He’s dead. Kali did the deed, which I think she needed. Peace of mind.” Joyce smiled. Her voice was oddly maternal for talking about an assassination.

He was admittedly a little shocked when Hopper and Joyce both closed in and hugged him, as well. He tensed up for a moment and then he just had to let it happen. This was his life now. These people were his *friends*.

Great.

19. Chapter 19

The days that followed Hopper and Mike's safe return were spent mostly in solitude. He was going to let them have their family time, obviously, and he and Hopper no longer had a case to work together as a pretense for spending time around each other.

So he was a little surprised when Joyce Byers showed up one chilly Saturday with coffee.

"Hey," she said, as if this was normal.

"Hi."

"Thank you for helping Hopper," she said when she took a seat.

"Didn't have anything better to do," he said dismissively, and she gave him the knowing, consternated look only a mother could employ so deftly. "It was no problem," he finally acquiesced.

Joyce was not full of frantic energy as she had been during the crisis, and he appreciated her natural presence; there was something vaguely comforting in it. She looked at his coffee table and saw the paper he'd been idly circling jobs in. The government, of course, had been in touch to offer their hush money. An ex-employee who had already been implicated in at least one death and scandal abducting a child and a police chief and ordering a hit on their families was not something that needed to be leaked (nor the half a dozen murders committed by a Chicago street gang in response). He'd taken the money, of course, with every intention of leaking some version of the story later. The truth could not be bribed. Murray could, but not the truth.

But that wouldn't last forever, and he needed a job.

"Going back to the city?" she asked.

"Considering it," he said.

"You know," she said. "And don't think of this as me trying to force anything, but the editor of the Hawkins Post is retiring soon. It's

probably not a thrilling job, but it'd keep you around here." This looked rehearsed, and Murray was trying to guess her angle when she continued. "Rob Munch is his name. He's personally interviewing any interested candidates. He says he won't retire until a replacement is secured."

"And none of his current staff are up to it?"

"According to Munch, no." She giggled.

"Is Hopper trying to keep me in Hawkins?" It was a little too dreamy and romantic for his taste, to imagine Hopper persuading the old editor to retire so Murray might consider taking a job in Hawkins. Wanting to keep the team together. Gag.

She snorted. "You're giving him a lot of credit. He mentioned it, but he'd never say anything to you about it. *I'm* trying to keep you in Hawkins," she said. "Nancy respects you, you helped us out, Hopper actually likes you in spite of himself. And he doesn't exactly have a lot of friends." She leaned in conspiratorially and concluded her list with: "and I can't be the only Jewish person in Hawkins forever. It's so dull."

He laughed. "Maybe I'll talk to them about that. But you tell Hopper if he wants to keep me around, he's gotta tell me himself. Not that I want to steal him from you."

She flushed red and denied nothing. "As I heard it, he'd be the one stealing you. Nancy --"

Nancy had many virtues, but she was still a teenage girl with a big teenage girl mouth. "Oh, shut up."

She cackled. "So it's true? With Karen?"

"It was a one-time accident." No need to lie to Joyce. "Two-time accident. A fluke of the universe. Don't read into it." He had, at one time in his life, read too much into interactions with potential romantic and sexual partners and he'd found the best approach to be "pretend everyone hates you and let them prove you wrong", because it involved way less pathetic mooning and borderline harassment.

She looked skeptical. “Okay, Murray. And you weren’t going to stay in Hawkins, either.”

He sipped the coffee and thought about that. It was true, he’d had every intention of never thinking about or speaking of this stupid little town again, but Nancy had dragged him back in, and Hopper had cuffed him to a metaphorical chair.

He was stuck here with friends and a life and despite himself, he’d put down roots. He had a *pet*.

Fuck.

“You win on that count, but I’m not particularly interested in the rest of it.”

She took a moment to scratch Jim the cat on the head gently before getting up and excusing herself. “All right, well, I’ll see you around town. We can get drinks.”

He begrudged her that.

When she left, he called the newspaper office and set up the interview. Why the fuck not, right? Working at a newspaper in a town conveniently located on a literal portal to hell couldn’t be worse than any other job he’d ever had.

20. Chapter 20

Notes for the Chapter:

(frodo baggins voice) it's...done.

ok, all joking aside. every comment and kudo and hit on this fic has been really nice and unexpected and heartwarming and thank you so much for indulging this insanity and sticking with me. as a writer, it's all i want! if you don't already, consider following me on tumblr (<http://rhllors.tumblr.com>). i'm going to be (Self)-publishing my first novel this year so uh, keep an eye out I guess? if you like what i do?

it was fun! i'm totally not ruling out a sequel or one-shots to fill in gaps or anything, but right now i am taking a slight breather.

He had a desk, and a shoebox of an office that reminded him of his office back in Chicago, in that it was tiny. However, the difference was stark; this office was tiny because the ancient building it resided in was tiny, not as a sign of his status at the job. This was an office of respect. His office in Chicago had been tiny because everyone there had hated him.

If the three people who worked at the Hawkins Post were weirded out by their new boss, they were not showing it.

"You've got a visitor," the meek little receptionist said. They really needed a Florence type in here, but he supposed he wasn't there to shake things up yet.

Jim Hopper looked too amused at the little office and desk, stripped of Old Man Munch's personal affects. "Well, look at you."

"Have you lost weight?" he shot back.

"I hope so, I'm on a diet. Flo's orders."

They both sort of nervously chuckled. "Thanks for the tip about the

job,” he said. “I was a couple months behind on child support, starting to get dodgy.”

“So *that’s* why you left Chicago.”

“I’m still learning names. I think the shy one is Tiffany. She can get you coffee if you want.”

“Her name is Tracy and I’m not hanging around, gotta get back to the job, I was just swinging in.” He turned to leave but hesitated in the doorway. “In the craziness the other week, I didn’t get to say...I mean. What I mean is –”

“You don’t have to, I won’t force your ego to do that.”

“I wanna say thanks, not confess my love,” he said with a snort. “So there. Thanks for helping out. It’s probably useful to have you here.”

“Probably,” he agreed.

“See you later, Bauman.”

“Later, Jim.”

That evening at home, Nancy was waiting by the door, as she tended to do. She looked relaxed though. She wasn’t coming to vent her issues or conspire against the government, she was just visiting. Whether that was good or bad, he didn’t know. However, he kind of liked it, either way.

“Hopper said you got a job at the newspaper,” she said. “That mean you’re staying around?”

“Seems that way,” he said, cutting on the lights.

“So...will you be like, too busy to show me how to do all the crazy stuff you do?” she asked, biting on her lower lip.

“No, probably not.” He thought about it for a second. “Maybe you could work at the paper part-time. It’d look good on a college application. If you’re worried about that kind of shit.”

“Really?”

“Can’t say it’d pay much, but sure.”

Nancy grinned, flopped down on the couch and let Jim the cat crawl into her lap and purr at her presence. Murray wished the cat wasn’t so openly affectionate with Nancy, it was really selling out his true feelings on the kid.

Too bad she wasn’t up for adoption.

“You ever listened to Nina Simone, Nancy?” he asked after a pause, flipping through his record collection.

“No.” He couldn’t imagine Karen or Ted Wheeler being jazz aficionados, and if they were he imagined their comfort level would stop at someone like Benny Goodman, so that hardly surprised him.

“She’s a singer and piano player,” he said. “She had to leave the country. Civil disobedience and the like,” he said. “But she’s very talented.” He put on a song and let it go, and Nancy listened politely. Murray fixed a drink and a sandwich, offering one to Nancy. She took the sandwich but was wise enough to turn down the vodka.

“This reminds me of you,” she said.

“Well, I am the one who showed it to you.”

“No, the words,” she snarked back.

*There'll be no one unless that someone is you
I intend to be independently blue*

“I’m not sure if I should be insulted or not.”

“I mean, just like...you’d rather sit around and wallow then move on from all the bad stuff and enjoy your life.”

“That’s a bold statement.” Probably a true statement, but that wasn’t any of her business, now was it? It wasn’t like he was hung up on his ex-wife or anything, he was just hung up on being bitter and pissed off about the hand the world had dealt him. But he’d, in some weird

way, faced those demons recently. The truth should've set him free, right?

"It was just a thought," she said, smirking like she knew something he didn't, which was categorically impossible, because she was a child.

"Do you want dinner? Steve brought another casserole over yesterday, I could heat it up." Steve was a nice boy, and had expressed an interest in becoming a cop, which was charming. Murray had little advice for it, but small talk was required in a place like Hawkins.

"I can't stay too long, I promised mom I would help her with dinner tonight. Unless you wanted to join us?" Her expression was devious, trying to read a response.

"Ha-ha, no thank you," he said, rolling his eyes.

Nancy shrugged. "Figured I'd offer."

"Take the record, give it a listen," he said, putting it back in his sleeve and offering it to her. "It's quality."

"Thanks, I will." She left after that, and he was alone again, contemplating the past few months of his life. He had derailed, re-railed, and changed paths completely. Was he happier where he was at now? He wasn't sure. Perhaps he was.

Whatever, life moves on.

It was such a stupid cliché, awkward encounters at the supermarket. Was he living in some kind of stupid romantic movie?

Well, probably not. For one, it'd have to be romantic for that to happen, and not a silent glare fight over the last bag of carrots.

"Karen."

"Murray."

"How have you been?" he asked, all gallantry as he set the bag in his

basket.

"I'll be better if you give me those carrots," she said, a winning smile on her face. As if she could flirt her way out of this situation.

Okay, she totally could. He didn't *really* need them.

"Fine," he said, tossing them into her cart. There was a pause as they considered each other.

"You know, you should have told me you were friends with my daughter," she said.

"Would you not have been slightly weirded out by a grown man you just met saying 'hey I hang out with your teenage daughter a lot'?" he asked. "Because if the situations were reversed, I'd be concerned."

Karen thought about this, vaguely amused. "Fair enough, it probably would have been out of place. But she explained it, and I think it's nice of you to help her. I'm glad she's passionate about things. I was never quite like that at her age, it's sort of a relief."

They both stood there, unsure how to proceed from the warm and fuzzy moment.

He thought about what Nancy had said, about his own particular brand of shortcomings.

"Do you maybe want to do dinner this week?" he asked, in the detached tone of someone who definitely wasn't too emotionally invested in the idea, even though okay maybe he was. He'd missed human contact.

"Sure," she said, with a smile.

Dinner happened on a Thursday night. It was nice. They talked about their kids, which was a lame single parent thing to do, and the general small talk that their last two "encounters" had really lacked.

They were at Murray's place, which had been downgraded from obsessively crazy to just quirkily weird, and she was polite enough not to comment on it. After the food had been consumed, he made a

quick mental calculation, and decided that it'd probably be in his best interest to do the dishes at that very second, because if he didn't, they'd sit in the sink for three or four...days. Yeah, days.

"I mean, Holly starts kindergarten in the fall, which will make it so much easier," she was saying. Then she paused. He turned around and noticed her expression could only be described as mildly baffled.

"What?"

"You're doing dishes?"

Maybe some people didn't talk while they cleaned the way his mother always had. "Wow, yeah, that's rude. I can wait until you leave, sorry," he said.

"No, no. It's...uhhh." She seemed flustered all of a sudden. "You can keep...doing them."

He put the now-cleaned plate down and didn't turn around, rather kept doing what he was doing. "Are you...are you getting turned on by this?"

"A little."

"That's..."

"You know how many times I've seen a grown man do his own dishes?" she asked. "Literally never. This is a new one for me."

Murray laughed. "Well. If I had known this was the secret, I'd have been way more successful with women in college."

"Just finish the dishes." The reason why only needed to be implied.

He just hoped Nancy didn't stop by.